

The Evening Star, August 20, 1873, p. 1
Burning of the Wawaset
Official Investigation Into the Disaster
Testimony Before The Treasury Board Today

The official investigation into the causes leading to the *Wawaset* disaster was resumed this morning at the Treasury department.

Capt. Samuel Gedney Recalled.

The license that the Potomac Ferry company received calls for 130 cabin passengers and 20 steerage passengers. The license was received from the Georgetown Custom house; the president of the company (Mr. Howison) asked me to go to Georgetown with him and I saw a duplicate of a license calling 130 cabin passengers and 20 steerage or deck. I kept the papers of the last inspection of only allowing 30 cabin and deck passengers, until I could see Mr. Saville; the boat made a trip without the papers; I said they were wrong and did not post them up; witness then presented the following permit:

“Application having been made to the undersigned local inspectors of steam vessels for the district of Baltimore for permission to steamer *Wawaset* to run on excursions said steamer having complied with the necessary requirements of law in regard to life-saving appliance, permission is hereby given to said steamer to carry 500 additional passengers, the route and distance of said excursion not to exceed 80 miles on the Potomac river.

James Lowry,
W.O. Saville
U.S. Local Inspectors.”

Baltimore, June 3d, 1872.

- Q. This, however was not an excursion?
A. Well, when we get 130 passengers we consider it an excursion.
Q. Were the contents of both inspection certificates the same with the exception of the number of passengers?
A. I think so, with only a slight difference.
Q. Did you call Mr. Saville’s attention to the difference?
A. I did; he was going to Alexandria, and he said, “I don’t think the boat has been reduced; I thought I did my duty; I have no idea how the mistake occurred; Mr. Lowry made the certificate on my desk in my room; he said the inspection would remain the same as last year; I am positive of that.”
Q. Mr. Lowry did not say that when he testified?
A. Well, he forgot himself; he said he inspected the boat in Baltimore, whereas the inspection was made in Washington.
Q. How long did the boat run without a certificate before you had it put up?
A. One trip I think; maybe two.
Q. Why did you not notify the inspector of this discrepancy?
A. I did notify Mr. Saville and he said the boat had not been reduced; it would remain the same as last year; that allowed us to carry one hundred and thirty cabin passengers.
Q. Have you a practice about your boats of instructing the men in the fire department?
A. No, sir.
Q. Not on this or any of your boats?

A. No, sir.

Captain Wood Recalled

Q. Did you ever receive any orders to exercise your men upon the pumps, hose or fire extinguishers?

A. No, sir.

Q. Do you know from your own knowledge that all fire apparatus was in good order?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. How do you know?

A. Well, we used the hose to wash the boat, and one of the fire extinguishers was used on the fire.

Q. The extinguisher had not been charged since you have been captain?

A. No, sir.

Q. Were you not aware that a captain had to be licensed?

A. Not until this investigation.

Q. Are you not aware that there are steamboat regulations governing the service?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Have you ever read them?

A. A little; some portion of them.

Q. Did you read that portion which required a captain to be licensed?

A. No, sir.

Q. Your reading was then of no service to you.

James D. Lowry Recalled.

The *Wawaset* was inspected in March last, when we substituted the new series of inspection; heretofore she had been inspected under the old series, because we didn't have them; when I inspected the boat, I said to Captain Foulke, (since dead,) how many passengers do you want to carry? He said forty, fifty or sixty, so I placed it at sixty.

Q. Would you have given a certificate for carrying one hundred and fifty?

A. No, sir.

Q. How many would you have given a certificate for?

A. One hundred and twenty, I think; I never said to Capt. Gedney the certificate is all right; that there had been no change.

Samuel Nash Recalled

Q. Will you please give a statement of how many passengers the boat is allowed to carry?

A. One hundred and thirty cabin and twenty deck.

Q. How do you know that?

A. Because I read it aboard the boat; the certificate was hung up on the boat in a walnut frame covered with glass; I saw at the time, which confirms my memory in this respect, it is a very small amount of people for the boat to carry; I thought she was allowed to carry three hundred.

Q. Why?

A. Because she has so many life preservers on board.

Q. Does your father (the engineer) usually call you to take his place when he goes to the bar-room?

A. No sir; he never goes in the bar-room.

Q. Were you put on watch at any time during this trip?

A. No, sir; I sometimes have stood at the engine while my father went to get a drink of water; he was always in full sight of the engine, however.

Plain Talk By The Inspector General

Gen. D.D. Smith, supervising inspector general of steamboats, who arrived in Washington this morning, then addressed those in the room as follows:

I presume, when I speak for a moment or two, that I am addressing steamboat men. Little did I think, five weeks ago, when I left the Treasury department on a trip of observation on the northern lakes, that we should first meet in this apartment, then being put in order for our service, to act as a jury and under such painful circumstances as are presented by the disaster to the *Wawaset*. I am very sorry that we are called together under such circumstances, and that we are obliged to enter into such an unpleasant duty, yet it is our duty, and the law obliges us. And these

Poor Bleeding, Mourning, And Broken Hearts,

Cry to us to perform it and to perform it thoroughly. And I trust that this commission, which has been appointed for the purpose, will make a thorough investigation that the innocent may go unharmed and the guilty be punished.

It is often thought that

Anybody May Be A Steam Boat Man.

I know that from my own experience; I know it from observation, for during the early part of my life I spent some time in the harness. But I judge you will all agree with me this morning that it is not every one who is a fit person to take charge of a steam vessel, a steam boiler, or a steam engine. It requires the

Best Men In Our Country

To do this successfully, profitably, and without danger to life or property; and I trust that our officers will be very careful in all their investigations, not only in relation to disasters, but in relation to the licensing of men who are not of the right stamp.

I do not propose to sum up this testimony, but this captain, who has just appeared upon the stand – it is very evident from his statement and from the statement of the superintendent, that there

Had Been Great Want Of Discipline,

Order and proper authority on the *Wawaset*. Whether system would have saved life or saved the boat I am not prepared to say.

So far as I have heard the testimony this morning in relation to the disaster, there appears to have been a want of discipline and order in relation to the government and care of that boat. I will not say now that they were particularly to blame for that. It is a matter which belongs to these gentlemen of the Commission, but I may add, as a bystander and a hearer of these things, that I desire that everything which pertains to the truth and to the full investigation of this

matter shall be brought out, that we may make a fair decision and form right judgments and act accordingly.

I make these few remarks because I feel that these gentlemen present are all steamboat men, and I wish to have them understand that there is a good deal connected with the steamboat interest, and with the steam vessel interest of our country, and that we need, as I have just repeated, the very best men for the purpose of taking charge of our steam vessels and managing them. Yet the common opinion is that anybody is fit for a steamboat captain and almost anybody for a steamboat engineer. Far from it, and hence the law, which provides that these inspectors shall be the parties to give their certificates to those whom they feel are proper persons to assume such important positions.

And I wish, just here, gentlemen who are from the press, that you will express my heartfelt sympathy and condolence with those who have lost near and dear ones by this disaster. This morning, perhaps, as many of the little ones rise from their beds expecting the father to call them around him at the family altar, he is gone from them.

It is a solemn moment here. I entered this city and this room this morning with profound feeling of regret and sorrow. It shortened my trip of exploration on the western lakes, because I felt anxious to be present before this investigation closed. I come here with feelings of deep regret and sorrow, and wish to express my profound sympathy with those who have lost their friends and relatives in their great affliction.

He further invited all present to make application for the steamboat regulations, which would be supplied from the office.

No further witnesses being present the investigation adjourned until Friday morning at 10 o'clock.