

A Plantation Museum Focused on Slavery

Congratulations on another excellent issue of *Social Education*—the special January-February issue on African American history. The article by LaGarrett King on “The Status of Black History in U. S. Schools and Society” was especially informative. I would like to add some information about an unusual Louisiana Plantation featuring the story of slavery from the slaves’ point of view: Whitney Plantation located in Wallace, Louisiana—the only plantation museum of its kind in the state, and the first one in the nation focusing on the lives of enslaved people, according to *The New York Times*. (Please see www.whitneyplantation.com or contact info@whitneyplantation.com, 225-265-3300). A comprehensive overview of authentic slave conditions is featured in slave cabins, a freedmen’s church, authentic large metal containers for boiling the sugar cane, forms of punishment, detached kitchen and outbuildings, and a 1790 owner’s house. There are poignant memorials built to honor the enslaved, featuring quotes of persons who had endured slavery and were recorded during the Works Progress Administration, as well as artistic renderings of them as children among other works of art. For a fascinating oral interview from the BBC with the founder of the museum, John Cummings, please select the NEWS section at <http://whitneyplantation.com/interactive-map.html>. It is a very powerful experience for all those in high school and beyond.

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A Forgotten Civil War Disaster

I would like to promote the anniversary of a forgotten piece of American Civil War history... the *Sultana* Disaster.

The *Sultana* was a riverboat built in 1863 in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the John Litherbury Shipyard. Until the end of the Civil War, the *Sultana* travelled the Mississippi River between St. Louis and New Orleans carrying supplies and news. In April 1865, after the end

of the Civil War, the *Sultana* was one of many riverboats charged with bringing home POWs that had been held by the Confederacy from Andersonville and Cahaba. They were taken to Camp Chase in Columbus, Ohio, to be paroled. The soldiers boarded the *Sultana* in Vicksburg, Mississippi, on April 21. While boarding, a quick fix was being made to one of the boilers. While the *Sultana* was built to carry only 376 persons including crew, there was some miscommunication and other contributing factors which led to over 2,000 being on board.

Around 2AM on April 27, 1865, the *Sultana* was seven miles north of Memphis when it exploded. About 1,800 people lost their lives, though the exact number will never be known. I am telling you all of this because I have a personal connection to this tragedy. My great-great-great-grandfather on my dad’s mother’s side was on board the *Sultana* and was lucky enough to survive. His recollections of the event are included in a book published in 1892 by fellow survivor Chester Berry called *Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors*, which is currently published through the University of Tennessee Press.

My dad and I are members of the *Sultana* Descendant’s Association. It was formed in the late 1980s and holds an annual reunion every April. The association is open to all whether or not you have a relative who was on board. Some of the founding members have no personal connection to the disaster, only a passion for the story. The reunion this year is being held in Franklin, Tennessee, on April 21 and 22.

Below I have included a few websites for further information—the descendants’ association, the *Sultana* Disaster Museum in Marion, Arkansas, and a crowdfunded documentary screened at the 2015 reunion in Memphis. There have also been a few very well-researched and detailed histories of the *Sultana* that are worth reading.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter. I hope that you are able to share with a wider audience this forgotten piece of history.

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Sultana Descendant’s Association: <http://sultanaremembered.com/>

Sultana Disaster Museum: www.sultanadisastermuseum.org/

Sultana Documentary: www.sultanadocumentary.com/

Further Reading:

Alan Huffman, *Sultana: Surviving the Civil War, Prison, and the Worst Maritime Disaster in American History* (Harper Perennial, 2010)

Jerry O. Potter, *The Sultana Tragedy: America’s Greatest Maritime Disaster* (Pelican Publishing; 1st edition, 1992)

Gene Eric Salecker, *Disaster on the Mississippi: The Sultana Explosion, April 27, 1865* (Naval Institute Press; BC edition, 1996)