

PIECING TOGETHER THE PAST  
by Rena Lents Thomas

Last Voyage Of The SULTANA - A Clay County, Illinois Survivor.....

The "Sultana", one of the largest and best ever built side-wheeler steamer, traveled the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans. No one could possibly know what lay ahead for the vessel, which would achieve the dubious distinction of being involved in the greatest maritime disasters of all times. Even worse than the sinking of the "Titanic" in 1912.

The "Sultana" was a typical side-wheeler built at Cincinnati only two years earlier for the lower Mississippi Cotton trade. She registered at 1,719 tons with a crew of 85. From war department records, it is known that she frequently carried Army personnel up and down the river but never the number she would embark with on this fateful day.

One dispatch of March 20, 1864, for instance, shows her carrying a contingent of the Second Missouri Colored Troops.

The Civil War was winding down in April of 1865. The nation was still in a state of shock and remorse over the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and had its fill of hearing of the death and violence which had been connected with the Civil War.

News traveled slower in those times and the Sultana, which left St. Louis on April 3, 1865, arrived in Cairo, Illinois on the 14th and learned of the death of Lincoln. It carried the news along its trip southward to the people along the landings.

Eventually reaching Vicksburg, Mississippi, the Sultana had arranged to deliver Northern Soldiers to their homes up north on its voyage back up the river to St. Louis. There would be no more fighting or destruction. Bitterness might linger for years but right now there was peace and the Union soldiers were going home.

This trip was a money maker for the owner of the side-wheeler, as he received so much per head from the government for each soldier on board. (rumored to be \$5 per).

It was greed and ignorance which would cause the Sultana, which had a passenger capacity of 376, to be greatly overloaded to six times its capacity. There were reportedly 2,500 on board that fateful day. Most who gathered at Vicksburg that day, were paroled prisoners from Andersonville Prison in Georgia and Cahaba Prison near Selma, Alabama. Much has been written about Andersonville and the horrible conditions which existed there so I choose here to inform you a little more about Cahaba Prison.

Cahaba prison, so named for a small Alabama town not far from Selma, was originally built as a cotton or corn shed. The prison was approximately 16,000 square