

Saluda Memorial

Lexington, Missouri, United States of America

On April 9, 1852, one of the most tragic steamboat accidents to occur on Missouri River took place near Lexington, Missouri. The steamboat Saluda was traveling up the river from St. Louis, to Kanesville (Council Bluffs), Nebraska and carried between 100 and 115 people Latter-day Saints.¹

Several immigrating Saints who had sailed across the Atlantic aboard the ship *Kennebec* to New Orleans and then made their way to St. Louis where Eli B. Kelsey and David J. Ross chartered the Saluda to take those who were continuing on to Council Bluffs.² Pieces of ice were still drifting down the river and few steamboats were operating at this time due to the hazardous conditions.

Upon reaching Lexington on April 4, difficulties occurred with attempting to push around the Lexington Bend. The Saluda did not have enough power to make it around the bend and spent the next few days attempting to get up the river and having some repairs done on the ship. The Saluda was an older steamboat which had originally sunk in 1847 and was refitted after being underwater for several months.³

On the morning of April 9, 1852, Captain Belt, part-owner and captain of the Saluda, decided to attempt again to round the bend. He is reported to have said that he would “round the point this morning or blow this boat to hell!”⁴ The boilers were filled to the maximum pressure and subsequently exploded shortly after leaving the dock. Approximately 75 of the 175 passengers lost their lives in the explosion with many others seriously wounded. Of these, 26 are believed to have been members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The citizens of Lexington responded with Christian charity, taking many of the survivors into their homes and caring for them. The city also created four committees to care for the sick, bury the dead, raise money to help the victims, and find a home for those children whose parents were killed



The presentation of the Saluda Memorial plaque. From left to right: JoAnna Woods, Fred E. Woods, William G. Hartley, Michael L. Hutchings, Martha Hutchings, Roger Slusher, Brant Neer, Mayor Tom Hayes.

Photo courtesy Alexander L. Baugh

in the blast. Abraham O. Smoot spoke of their charity when he wrote that “I shall never forget the kindness of the citizens of Lexington in caring for the living and burying the dead. The Lord certainly inspired them to do all that sympathy and benevolence could suggest in aid of the afflicted.”⁵

On April 9, 2002, residents of Lexington and descendants of survivors of the explosion gathered together to mark the sesquicentennial anniversary since the Saluda tragedy. A memorial park was created which includes a plaque, a bell similar to the original Saluda bell. Also, in 2004, a documentary about the tragic event was created by KBYU and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation.

SOURCES

¹ “Don’t Go Aboard the Saluda!”: William Dunbar, LDS Emigrants, and Disaster on the Missouri,” William G. Hartley, *Mormon Historical Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 46.

² *Contributor*, July 1892, Vol. 13, No. 9, 408.



³ Hartley, 44.

⁴ Ibid, 52.

⁵ *Contributor*, 414.

ABRAHAM O. SMOOT'S ACCOUNT OF THE STEAMBOAT SALUDA¹

“I had a very narrow escape on the occasion of the Saluda disaster. I had purchased the supplies for my company to make its overland journey with, except cattle, at St Louis, and had decided to go farther up the river to buy the stock, when Eli B. Kelsey came to me to consult me in regard to chartering the Saluda to convey an independent company of Saints up the river. I went with him to examine the boat, and on finding that it was an old hulk of a freight boat, fitted up with a single engine, I strongly advised him against having anything to do with it. He seemed to be influenced in making choice of it entirely by the fact he could get it cheaper than a better one; but in my opinion it seemed folly, for in addition to the danger of accident, the length of time likely to be occupied in making the journey would more than counterbalance what might be saved in the charge for transit. However, he decided to charter it, and then both he and the captain urged me strongly to take passage with them, offering to carry me free of cost if I would only go; but I could not feel satisfied to do so, I followed a few days afterwards on the Isabel and overtook the Saluda at Lexington, where she was stopped by the float-ice and unable to proceed farther. I went on board of her to visit the Saints, who were in charge of D. J. Ross, Eli B. Kelsey having gone ashore to purchase cattle, and left just before the last plank was drawn in, preparatory to attempting to start. I had not walked to exceed two hundred yards after leaving the Saluda before the explosion occurred, and on turning to

look in the direction of the ill-fated boat, I saw the bodies of many of the unfortunate passengers and various parts of the boat flying in the air in every direction. Fortunately for the Saints on board, they were mostly on the deck of the boat and pretty well towards the stern, and they consequently fared better than those below, or on the forepart of the boat, which was blown entirely to pieces. As it was, however, upwards of twenty of the Saints were lost or subsequently died of their wounds. My own preservation I can only attribute to the providence of the Almighty, for if I had remained a moment on the wharf to see the boat start, as would have been very natural for a person to do, I would have been blown into eternity as those were who stood there.

“I shall never forget the kindness of the citizens of Lexington in caring for the living and burying the dead. The Lord certainly inspired them to do all that sympathy and benevolence could suggest in aid of the afflicted. The city council set apart a piece of ground in which to bury the Saints who had died, and Wm. H. Russell, the great government freighter, and many other prominent citizens did all they could to comfort and help the afflicted survivors. Besides their devoted attentions, their contributions in aid of the Saints amounted to thousands of dollars.”

SOURCE

¹ *Contributor*, July 1892, Vol. 13, No. 9, 414.

HENRY BALLARD'S ACCOUNT OF THE EXPLOSION OF THE STEAMBOAT SALUDA¹

“I had just been on shore to buy some provisions for a family by the name of May, which I had under my charge, and we had set down on some boxes and commenced to eat breakfast, when



without the least warning, the boiler of the old boat exploded with a terrific noise, scattering death and destruction in all directions. The fore part of the boat was almost entirely blown away. I was thrown about two rods and landed under a bunk, together with a man who had his brains dashed out. I was stunned and remained unconscious for nearly half an hour with a hole in my head near the top of the brain. While in a semi-conscious condition, I was under the impression that I was floating down the river on broken pieces of plank, but I finally saw daylight through an opening, which proved to be the door of the paddle-wheels, and seeing a man running past, I followed him and jumped off the boat onto the land; but I soon found that I was unable to stand and consequently laid down upon some boards, lying on the bank of the river, while the blood was streaming down my face from the wound in my head. I soon learned that none of the family which I had charge of had been killed, and only one of them hurt at all.

After recovering somewhat, I returned to the boat to look for my baggage, but could find nothing. Two shepherd dogs that I had brought with me from England had been entirely blown away. I found the piece of bread I held in my hand when the explosion occurred and the tin cup from which I was in the act of taking a drink of coffee at the fatal moment; it was mashed flat as a dollar. I also picked up my knife covered with blood. The people of Lexington were kind to us, and especially to the wounded.

“At the time of the explosion many of the passengers were asleep in their beds.

“The kind captain of the Isabel offered to take us to Council Bluffs free of charge, which offer many of the survivors accepted, myself included. I had lost nearly all my effects; one box of clothing I lost entirely, and the box which was in the hold of the vessel I afterwards found standing in mud and water; but nearly all the contents were so badly damaged, that they were useless. Consequently, I left Lexington with what clothing I had on my back, without a hat and only one extra sock.

Nor had I money wherewith to buy anything for myself or the family who was with me; but the Lord raised up kind-hearted friends, who, although strangers to me, gave me sufficient money to buy provisions for the family to last till we got to the Bluffs.”

SOURCE

¹ *Contributor*, July 1892, Vol. 13, No. 9, 413.

WILLIAM C. DUNBAR'S ACCOUNT OF THE EXPLOSION OF THE STEAMBOAT SALUDA¹

“On the morning of the fatal day, (Friday, April 9th, 1852,) I, together, with my previously named friends, Brothers Ross and Campbell, arose quite early to get breakfast. Hanging kettles on the stove to boil water, we stepped outside of the space encircled by the tar canvass, after I had told my wife, who together with our two children was just in the act of getting out of bed, that I would be back for breakfast in a few minutes. This was the last I ever said to my wife and children while they were alive. We were standing on the deck watching the labors of the crew in starting the boat, and I witnessed just two revolutions of the paddle wheels, when I remember nothing more till I found myself lying on the bank of the river within three yards of the water's edge, with my clothes drenching wet, and my head all covered with blood. I felt as if I was just waking up from a deep sleep.

“I am of the opinion that I was blown in to the river by the explosion, and subsequently pulled out by some rescuing party, who then left me, thinking I was dead, but I have never been told by any one how it really happened. Brother Ross was thrown into the middle of the river, and the current brought him near the shore some distance below, where somebody reached him a pole; and



he was rescued. Brother Campbell's dead body was picked up quite a ways down the stream.

"As soon as I had regained consciousness and began to open my eyes, I looked around, and saw the mangled form of a child lying close by me. Recognizing its clothing I soon made the startling discovery that it was my own dear baby boy, whom I, a short time before, had seen in its mother's arms. I attempted to rise to go over to the spot where my dead child lay, but found myself unable to do so, and I now also noticed a sharp pain in my back, as my spine had been severely hurt by being thrown so violently into the river; from the effects of this I have suffered with pains in my back ever since. My attempt to arise attracted the attention of two gentlemen, who immediately came to my assistance, and I was now carried by them to a neighboring store, which had hurriedly been turned into a temporary hospital to receive the wounded survivors of the terrible disaster. I arrived at this place just in time to see my wife, who was lying on the floor, breathe her last. She had been cast on shore by the explosion, and carried to the store in a dying condition. My other child, a little girl about five years old, was lying in the same room, among the dead, her body so mangled that I could scarcely recognize her, and in fact so hard was it to identify her, that a lady survivor also claimed her as her child. I have on several occasions since reasoned on the possibility of my being mistaken in identifying the body as that of my child, and wondered if it could be possible that my little girl was among those who fell into the hands of the special committee appointed by the citizens of Lexington to take care of the orphan children. Some of the people, into whose care these children were entrusted, were very reluctant to give them up when asked to do so by relatives or friends; and it is quite possible that one or two of them were never recovered. Some of the citizens, although extremely kind to the unfortunates, would perhaps be conscientious in believing they were doing a good deed in preventing them from being sent to Utah.

"I had been in the store only a short time

when a gentleman brought a hack in which he took me to his private residence, where I was treated with much hospitality and kindness, although the man admitted that he was one of those who years ago had shouldered his gun to help drive the "Mormons" out of Missouri. Owing to the injuries my back had sustained, I was unable to move for several days, but I finally got strong enough to walk about, when I was shown the spot where the earthly remains of my wife and children were laid to rest. A few of the sick and wounded still remained in Lexington, when a boat came along on which I and others secured passage up the river."

SOURCE

¹ *Contributor*, July 1892, Vol. 13, No. 9, 412.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Address:

Corner of 13th Street & Franklin
Lexington, Missouri 64067

Hours of Operation:

Daylight to dark

Admission:

Free

ADDITIONAL READING RESOURCES

Contributor, July 1892, Vol. 13, No. 9, 408-414.
"Gratitude goes on for 1852 kindnesses," *LDS Church News*, June 26, 2004.
William G. Hartley, "Don't Go Aboard the



- Saluda!": William Dunbar, LDS Emigrants, and Disaster on the Missouri," *Mormon Historical Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 2003, 40-70.
- William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda*, (Riverton, Utah: Millennial Press, 2002).
- William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, "Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda: Tragedy and Compassion at Lexington, Missouri, 1852," *Missouri Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (July 2005):281–305.
- R. Scott Lloyd, "Town memorializing 1852 steamboat disaster," *LDS Church News*, March 16, 2002.
- L. Douglas Smoot, "Abraham O. Smoot and the Saluda Steamboat Explosion, 9 April 1852," *Mormon Historical Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 2004, 143-147.
- Fred E. Woods, "Dedication of Saluda Memorial in Lexington, Missouri," *I*, Fall 2002.