

## BOAT DISASTERS

*On a June morning in 1816 . . . when New Albany was scarcely 3 years old . . . an event occurred upriver that was the first of many similar tragedies which were to plague river history. The tiny steamboat Washington, one of the earliest built, was leaving Marietta, Ohio, when a cylinder head blew out. The rush of live steam knocked most of the crew into the water and scalded many to death. Twenty-eight years later New Albany was to learn at first hand how terrible a steamboat explosion could be.*

The date was October 23, 1844. The *Lucy Walker*, a Cincinnati-built boat not yet a year old, had stopped at the New Albany wharf and was again on her way down river. About 4 miles below the city she was hailed by a slower boat carrying passengers who wanted to transfer to the *Walker* – a group of ministers and their families returning to St. Louis after attending a conference in Ohio.

The passengers had scarcely been taken aboard when suddenly a tremendous explosion hurled passengers and wreckage skyward and even carried parts of the ill-fated *Walker* to the land on both sides of the river. Of 130 passengers aboard the *Walker*, a scant 40 or 50 survived.

New Albany received its first word of the extent of the explosion when the U.S. snag boat *Gopher*, which had been nearby, arrived with many of the dead and injured. The famous old Hale Tavern at Main and West First was hastily converted to an improvised hospital. The whole city was stunned by the disaster. Many stores were closed and flags were flown at half-mast. A mass funeral was held at Wesley Chapel with 25 coffins arranged around the altar.

Fifteen of the victims were buried in Fairview Cemetery where their gravestones still bear mute testimony to the most horrifying river tragedy in this area.

Although the explosion of the *Lucy Walker* was the most spectacular of the river boat disasters New Albany had experienced, the history of river boating here is marked with many stories of accidents and mishaps. The Falls of the Ohio were responsible for many early accidents when boats were swept into the raging waters and sunk by the jagged rocks which ripped holes in their hulls. Even as late as 1911 the Falls caused a mishap which touched New Albany.

That year the tiny towboat *Monterey* was taking the packet steamer *Lucinda* from Louisville to the Howard Shipyards in Jeffersonville for repairs. As they crossed the river, both boats were caught in the grip of the swift current above the Falls and carried through the rapids. The *Monterey* went to the bottom, but the *Lucinda* luckily floated through without mishap and went drifting downriver. As she passed New Albany, the *Northern*, a towboat of the E. T. Slider fleet, went to her rescue and took the *Lucinda* safely to the Howard yards.

The last steamboat explosion in this area occurred in the early (1904) years of the present century when the towboat *Fred Wilson* went up with a roar a short distance down stream from the K & I bridge.

Riverboat disasters are almost unheard of today. A year-round deep-water channel, canals around dangerous stretches of water, radar and other modern navigation methods, better boat construction and strict Federal inspection all combine to keep mishaps at almost the zero point.

Reminder of early disasters still crop up, however. A few years ago a descendent of one of the *Lucy Walker* victims wrote to local authorities seeking information about her great-grandfather. He was found to be one of those buried in Fairview. And some years earlier two boys playing on a sandbank

below New Albany found an old half-buried iron-bound cedar chest. Inside were tools rusted from long immersion in the water. On the outside of the tool chest could still be read the name – *Lucy Walker*.

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