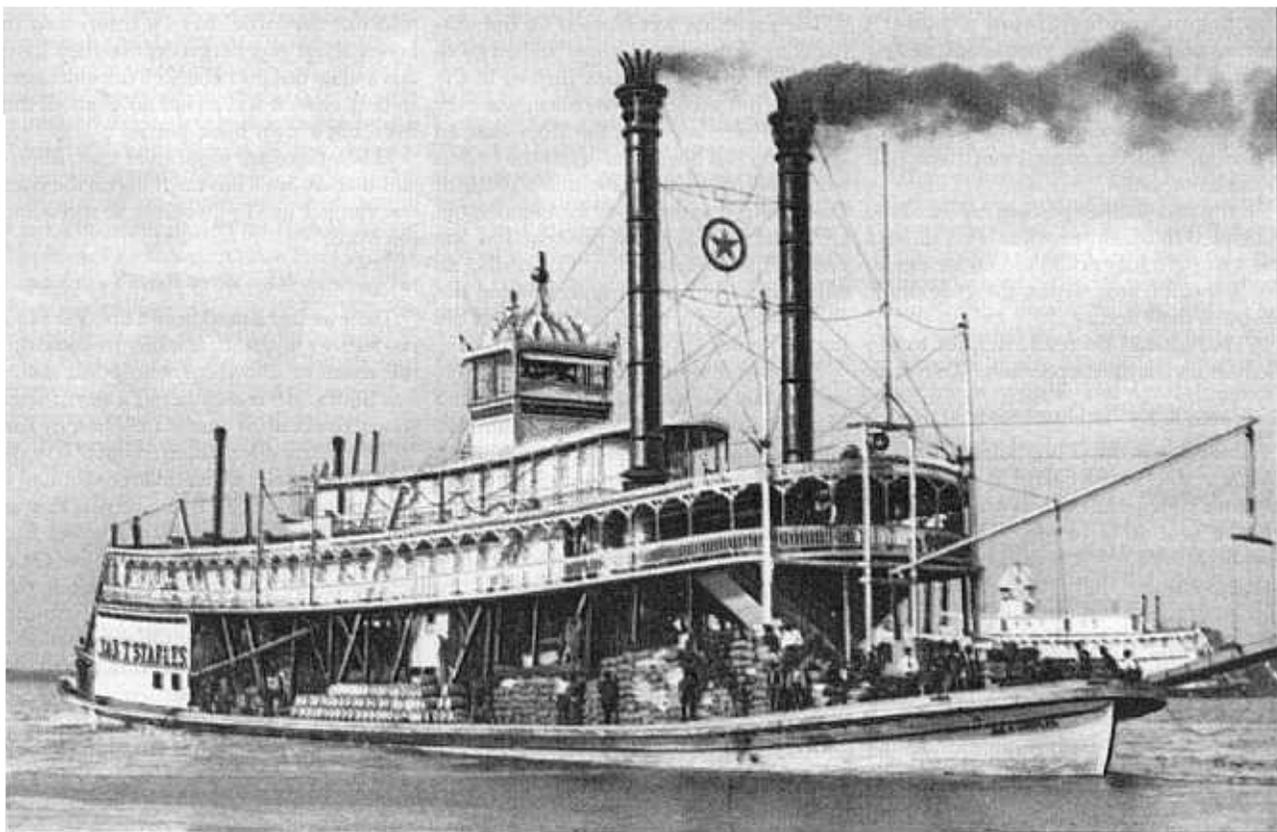


This Southern Steamboat Had A Tragic Ending



The Jas. T. Staples blew up in 1913.

BY JAMES V. SWIFT
WJ Contributing Editor

In the Mobile Convention Center on May 17-18, the Warrior-Tombigbee Waterway Association will hold its annual meeting, talking about affairs affecting those important rivers. And they have been important for a long time, feeding the goods of central Alabama into the great port of Mobile.

Some nice-looking steamboats served the area during those packet days, including the Jas. T. Staples. Unfortunately, the Staples' greatest claim to fame was its demise. This was brought to mind by a clipping from the Mobile Press-Register sent to us by Ernest M. Tims of Butler, Ala., which tells of the explosion of the Staples on January 10, 1913, and the unusual circumstances surrounding the boat and its former owner, Norman Staples. (Tims, incidentally, was a deckhand on the mv. Wisconsin of Findlay Towing Company, Northport, Ala., as a young man.)

Out Of Mobile

The Staples was built at Mobile in 1908 at a cost of \$40,000. It was 207.2 by 35.6 by five feet. It was known as the "Big Jim." The Staples could carry 2,500 bales of cotton; its usual run was between Demopolis and Mobile.

The Staples was at Powe's Landing, about six miles above the present-day Coffeeville Lock and Dam, when the explosion occurred. Ten were killed and 16 injured. The steamer John Quill brought the dead and injured to Mobile, where some 3,000 gathered at the city hall to claim the dead and take care of those hurt.

The WJ carried a 2½-page story on the accident. (Although officially registered as the Jas. T. Staples, it was often called the James T. Staples.)

"One week ago on Thursday afternoon, Capt. Norman Staples committed suicide at his home in Mobile. His death was precipitated by the loss of the pride of his heart, the steamer James T. Staples, which passed from his control one month ago when his

financial affairs collapsed. Brooding over this misfortune led to his final tragic ending.

"One week after his death, the James T. Staples blew up, almost at the exact minute at which Capt. Staples killed himself, and the scene of her tragic end was at the grave of her former owner. Four miles inland from the scene of the wreck lie the remains of Capt. Staples. The steamer was as near to this mound as she could get.

"Capt. W. H. Gray, the former master of the James T. Staples, owes his life to the death of Capt. Staples. He and Capt. Staples were long time friends, and since the retirement of Capt. Staples from business over a year ago, he has been the chartered master of the James T. Staples.

"Last Friday morning, Capt. Gray took the family and the remains of Capt. Staples to Bladon Springs to inter the body. That day he retired from the position of master of the vessel, and Capt. Bartee, one of the new owners, took his place...."

Bartee died in the explosion.

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Staples

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The explosion was blamed on the mishandling of the steam gauges and on sabotage (explosives on a stick thrown in the boilers), but no definitive reason was ever found. There was also the story that an apparition had been seen under the boilers when the boat was a few miles south of Coffeerville; it so disturbed the engineer room crew that they deserted the boat and one man jumped overboard. At Coffeerville, an old man said to be a prophet stated the ghost was a sign of death and the end of the Jas. T. Staples.

The engines and remaining two boilers were put on the steamer Peerless. The hull of the Staples drifted down to within five miles of the Bladon Springs to within five miles of the Bladon Springs Cemetery where Capt. Norman Staples was buried. (The newspaper account had a picture of Capt. Staples' grave with nephew Bobby Dahlberg looking at the headstone.)

On Libraries

Commenting on our item a few weeks ago about libraries, Kathy Flippo, author of the popular book *Between the Saints: Louis and Paul*, writes: "I have been to every

library between St. Paul and St. Louis (except St. Louis itself), and what amazes me is that two of the river town librarians told me they wouldn't be interested in books about the river because they have one and no one ever checks it out any more. In both cases it was an old novel about the river, not a 'river book' per se!

"Then there are other river town librarians that say 'we'll buy anything on the river you can get us.' I'm working at spreading the word."

The Beer Boat

Then we had a note from Capt. Pat Flippo, Kathy's husband, wanting to know the full name of a towboat whose last name was Smith. He remembered a sternwheel steam towboat of that name late in the 1930s or early '40s that towed out of Evansville, Ind., with a covered barge that had a big sign on it, "Cook's Beer and Ale, Evansville, Indiana." It hauled full bottles and kegs of beer southbound, out of the Ohio and down the Lower with stops along the way at Memphis, Greenville, Vicksburg, Baton Rouge and New Orleans. On the back haul they were loaded with the empty bottles and kegs for refill.

Note: this was undoubtedly the J.B. Smith, operated by the Delta Line of Memphis.