

# Town memorializing 1852 steamboat disaster

By R. SCOTT LLOYD  
Church News staff writer

Townspeople opened their hearts and homes 150 years ago to care for the wounded, bury the dead and succor the survivors. Now, today's residents of Lexington, Mo., are remembering the explosion of the steamboat *Saluda* with four days of observance beginning April 6 and to be capped by the unveiling of a monument on April 9, the day of the sesquicentennial.

Widely regarded as one of the worst disasters of the 19th Century Mormon migration — certainly the worst involving transportation on water — the *Saluda* explosion on April 9, 1852, killed an estimated 75 of the 175 on board, including some two dozen of the Latter-day Saints en route to Salt Lake City.

In connection with the sesquicentennial, a new book co-authored by two BYU Church history professors, William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, is being published next month by Millennium Press, titled *Explosion of the Steamboat "Saluda."*

It was, in fact, preparation of that book that prompted the upcoming observance in Lexington. The authors' research put them in contact with Lexington's director of tourism, Michelle Neer, and her husband, Brant. Eventually emerged a planned annual festival called Lexington Steamboat Days. Mr. Neer became co-chairman of the *Saluda* 150 Committee.

Mr. Neer said the observance will feature re-enactments of the aftermath of the explosion in which citizens came to the aid of the injured. Also featured will be driving tours of LDS Church history sites in nearby Far West and Ray County and self-guided tours in Lexington. Officials are hoping for a good turnout, even though the celebration coincides with the annual general conference of the Church in Salt Lake City April 6-7.

He described the monument as consisting of five kiosks containing information, one of them holding a bronze plaque with an inscription describing the disaster that reads in part:

"In early April 1852 the aging side-wheeler steamboat *Saluda* churned up the Missouri River from St. Louis, bound for Kaneshville (Council Bluffs), Iowa. Unable to push past the Lexington Bend due to ice floes and strong currents, it docked at Lexington's Upper Landing. Among 175 passengers still on board were people heading for various up-river towns, men bound for California gold fields, and about 75 Mormon emigrants, mostly Europeans, hoping to join wagon trains going to Utah Territory. On Good Friday morning, April 9, Captain Francis Belt vowed to 'round the Bend or blow this boat to [h—].' At about 7:30 a.m. the *Saluda* eased from the landing. Before the paddle wheels made three revolutions, the red hot boilers exploded. The sound was heard two miles away.

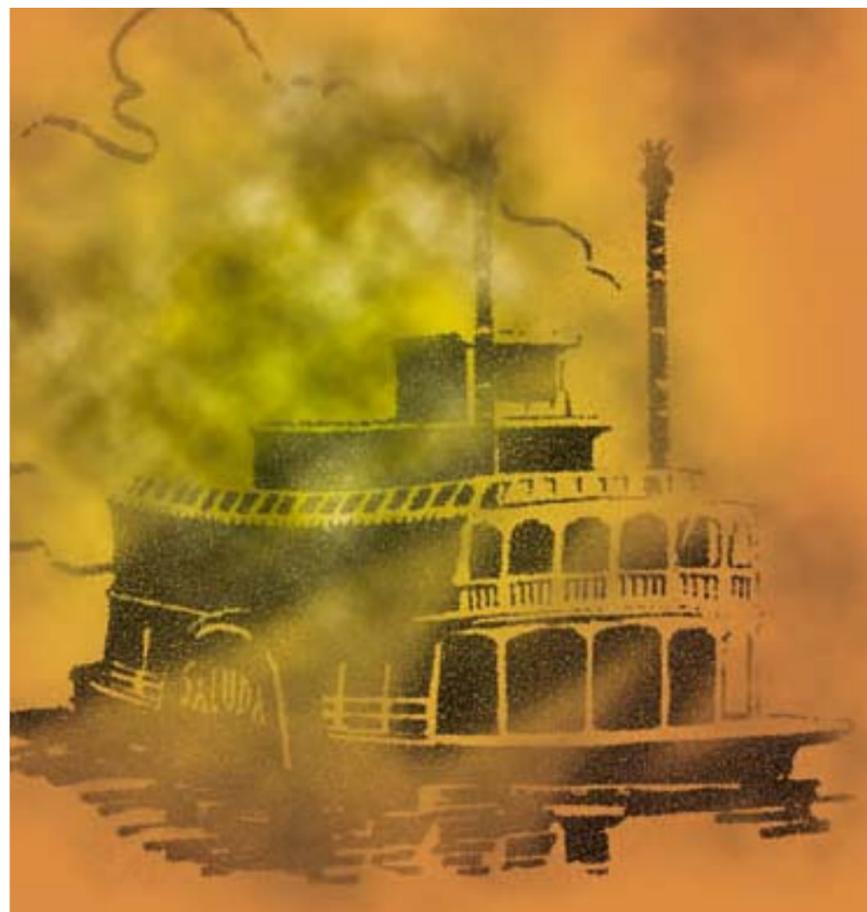


Illustration by John Clark

Above, artist's conception depicts *Saluda*, which exploded in 1852. Below, Fred E. Woods, co-author of a history of the disaster, stands next to steamboat's bell, owned by First Christian Church in Savannah, Mo., since 1852, when it was salvaged by the church's pastor.



Photo by William G. Hartley

Passengers, crew, baggage, timbers, chimneys, and boiler scraps were blown ashore or into the river. The *Saluda's* bell landed high up the riverbank, as did a

600-pound safe.... Two-thirds of the boat — everything above the lower deck and extending back to the wheelhouse — was blown away. Currents moved the

*Saluda's* remains back against the levee, its stern section underneath several feet of water.... Lexington's shocked citizens rallied heroically to rescue victims, nurse the wounded, raise funds for those who lost everything and find homes for orphans.... The *Saluda* disaster ranks as one of the worst steamboat tragedies — perhaps the worst — on the Missouri River...."

The book, drawn in part from journal entries and from a summary by assistant Church historian Andrew Jenson in the July 1892 issue of the *Contributor*, includes gripping and often heart-rending accounts of victims and survivors.

William Dunbar, a Scottish convert to the Church, and his family had three opportunities to avoid passage on the ill-fated craft, the first time literally missing the boat. The family succeeded in boarding in time to be victims of the explosion; his wife and both of their children perished. He said he received care, kindness and hospitality in the home of a man who "admitted that he was one of those who years ago had shouldered his gun to help drive the 'Mormons' out of Missouri."

Among the survivors was Henry Ballard who assisted the George May family in coming West. The family survived the explosion, but before they could embark for Utah from Kaneshville, cholera claimed the lives of the father and the eldest and youngest daughters. Another son and then the mother died on the trail, leaving four orphaned children. Brother Ballard also contracted cholera but survived. He served as bishop in Logan, Utah, for 39 years, and his son, Melvin J. Ballard, and, later, great-grandson M. Russell Ballard became members of the Quorum of the Twelve.

Abraham O. Smoot, an eye-witness to the tragedy who avoided disaster himself when he left the boat after visiting the saints on board just before it was to embark, later wrote: "I shall never forget the kindness of the citizens 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 town conducted a mass burial for 21 victims the evening of the disaster and a mass funeral for them the next day. The authors of the book identified three orphans that the townspeople took into their homes and adopted.

"The story of the *Saluda* is a story of tragedy and triumph," the authors commented in their book. "It is both dreadful and inspiring. It breathes a spirit of death and horror but also of life and love. To members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it serves as a reminder that although there was a cruel forced exile of Mormons from Missouri, there were also compassionate hearts among Missourians with charity toward the Mormons."

E-mail: [rscott@desnews.com](mailto:rscott@desnews.com)