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Explosion on the Potomac: The 1844 Calamity Aboard the USS Princeton

Kerry S. Walters
Gettysburg College

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Explosion on the Potomac: The 1844 Calamity Aboard the USS Princeton

Abstract

In 1844, the USS Princeton was the most technologically sophisticated warship in the world. Its captain, Robert Stockton, and President John Tyler were both zealous expansionists, and they hoped that it would be the forerunner in a formidable steam-powered fleet. On a Potomac cruise intended to impress power brokers, the ship's main gun—the Peacemaker—exploded as the vessel neared Mount Vernon. Eight died horribly, while twenty others were injured. Two of Tyler's most important cabinet members were instantly lost, and the president himself had a near miss—making it the worst physical disaster to befall a presidential administration. The tragedy set off an unpredictable wave of events that cost Tyler a second term, nearly scuttled plans to add Texas to the Union and stirred up sectional rancor that drove the nation closer to civil war. Author Kerry Walters chronicles this little-known disaster that altered the course of the nation's history.

Keywords

USS Princeton, President John Tyler, Mexican War

Disciplines

History | Military History | Philosophy | Political History

Comments

This is the introduction of Dr. Kerry Walters' book *Explosion on the Potomac: The 1844 Calamity Aboard the USS Princeton*.

EXPLOSION ^{ON} THE POTOMAC

THE 1844 CALAMITY ABOARD THE USS *PRINCETON*

KERRY WALTERS

Charleston



London

INTRODUCTION

“A Most Awful and Lamentable Catastrophe”

News this afternoon of a frightful occurrence at Washington...I suppose there's scarcely an instance on record, of late times at least, in which so many high official characters under one government have been destroyed by the same blow.

—George Templeton Strong¹

On the morning of February 29, 1844—a leap year—Americans across the nation awoke to shocking newspaper headlines. *HORRIBLE ACCIDENT! GREAT GLOOM IN WASHINGTON!* shouted the *New York Herald*. Not to be outdone, Washington's *National Intelligencer* blared, *MOST AWFUL AND MOST LAMENTABLE CATASTROPHE!* followed by a hair-raising, *Narrow Escape of the President!* Another Washington paper, the *Madisonian*, proclaimed: *Melancholy Catastrophe!* Later that day, when news of the accident reached New York attorney and diarist George Templeton Strong, he reeled at both its grisly details and the apparent capriciousness of fate. He wasn't alone. The entire nation was shaken.

The event that rattled everyone was the explosion of a gigantic cannon—the largest and reputedly most powerful piece of naval ordnance in the world—aboard the USS *Princeton*. The cannon, christened “Peacemaker,” and the steam-powered *Princeton* were showpieces in what President John Tyler intended to be a modernized navy whose formidable strength would rival Great Britain's. Both had seen less than six months of service at the time of the disaster. When the explosion occurred, the vessel's captain, Robert Stockton, was proudly showing them off to several hundred

of the nation's ruling elite—the president himself, as well as congressmen, diplomats, entrepreneurs and high-ranking military men, many of them accompanied by their wives—during a pleasure cruise on the Potomac. The food and drink Stockton served his guests were of the best quality, a marine band provided gay background music and brightly colored flags on the ship's rigging snapped festively in the breeze. But the high-spirited occasion ended horrifically when the over-primed Peacemaker blew up in a firing demonstration, shooting chunks of hot iron across the main deck that instantly killed Tyler's secretary of state and his secretary of the navy, a career diplomat, an experienced naval commodore, a New York millionaire, a slave and two crew members. Several sailors were wounded, a U.S. senator was knocked unconscious and Captain Stockton was concussed and burned. The president just missed being one of the victims. At the last moment, he chose to stay below deck, where the ship's guests were being wined and dined, instead of going topside to witness the firing of the Peacemaker. His decision very likely saved his life and spared the nation what would've been the death of a second chief executive in less than three years.

As usually happens in the first chaotic hours after a disaster, there was a fair amount of confusion about what actually took place. Some newspapers announced that dozens of seamen, including Captain Stockton, had perished in the blast. Others reported that two or three women among the guests had been blown overboard. Neither of these claims was true. There was also an unseemly focus in the press, much of it more imaginative than accurate, on the gory details of the injuries suffered by the victims. The public, simultaneously horrified and riveted by accounts of the disaster aboard the *Princeton*, couldn't get enough of them. Stories about the catastrophe, the state funeral of those who were slain and the boards of inquiry that later investigated the incident filled the newspapers for months and were eagerly read, discussed and debated.

No doubt much of the public's obsession with the *Princeton* explosion was fueled by morbid curiosity. Commentators as far back as Plato have noted the nearly irresistible way we humans are drawn to images of mayhem and tales of disaster. But citizens were also captivated by the sheer enormity of the accident. Never before had a presidential cabinet suffered such a sudden and overwhelming physical calamity. Never before had such a roster of American dignitaries met violent death at an official function. George Templeton Strong could remember no other incident in which so many governmental officials had been so abruptly cut down. A reporter for the *New York Herald* opined that the great "national calamity" that deprived the country of so much talent was unique in the history of the world. This

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An artist's imaginative but inaccurate rendition of the Peacemaker's explosion. *R.M. Devens, Our First Century (1877)*.

was an exaggeration, but it captured the nation's sense of being belly-punched. What no one could know at the time was that the full effects of the blow wouldn't be felt for months and even years, for the explosion aboard the *Princeton* gradually revealed itself to be more than an isolated tragedy. It was, on the contrary, an historical game changer.

A great deal of what happens in the world is, at least in hindsight, unsurprising and does nothing to dramatically alter the predictable flow of future events. But occasionally, something occurs that no one could've foreseen and that makes a profound difference by deflecting historical trajectories in unanticipated directions. A Union courier's chance discovery

of Robert E. Lee's battle plans right before Antietam, the 1914 assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand or Alexander Fleming's stumbling across a mold subsequently named penicillin come immediately to mind.

Historical events like these, which have low predictability but extreme impact, are called "black swans." They are, as one commentator calls them, "outliers" because they fall outside the range of reasonable expectations and, consequently, startle everyone when they appear.² Because they're unforeseeable, there are few psychological or physical mechanisms in place to help us cope with them. If the black swan is beneficial to humankind, this lack of preparedness is usually benign. It's when we're caught off guard by the destructive ones that we reel in bewilderment.

The explosion on the USS *Princeton* was a classic black swan of the destructive variety. It's not just that it was unexpected—the vessel was state of the art, its captain was an able seaman and the Peacemaker had been test fired before being hoisted aboard—but also that the consequences of the disaster were so stunning that in retrospect the loss of life, tragic though it was, paled in comparison. The explosion aboard the *Princeton* set in motion a chain of events that nearly cost the United States the state of Texas, put an end to John Tyler's chance of a second term in the White House, delayed the modernization of the U.S. Navy by some fifteen years, dangerously ratcheted up tension between North and South over slavery and contributed to the eventual eruption of two wars. There are few events in the nation's history that have launched such a domino succession of unpredictable and disastrous, or near-disastrous, consequences. In a very real sense, the *Princeton* calamity, although it didn't seem so to people at the time and has been largely forgotten by later generations, was a profoundly significant moment in the nation's history.³

It's also a fascinating narrative in its own right, centering as it does on the lives and ambitions of four intriguing men: John Tyler, a president who desperately wanted to create a legacy for himself by adding Texas to the Union; his extremely able secretary of state, Abel Upshur, who perished aboard the *Princeton* on the eve of his greatest diplomatic triumph; Robert Stockton, the flamboyantly self-promoting ship's commander whose pride perennially got in the way of his greatness; and states' rights champion John C. Calhoun, Upshur's successor, who in a single rash letter defending slavery sparked a political explosion that rivaled the black powder one that ripped apart the Peacemaker. Intrigue, rivalry, duplicity, hubris, folly and, as we'll discover, a bit of romance are all part of the story of the great black swan disaster of 1844.