

The Sultana Disaster Museum  
Groundbreaking Ceremony  
Veterans Day – November 11, 2022  
Marion, Arkansas  
Rodney E. Slater, Keynote Speaker

### **The Better Angels**

April 1865 was a terrible, tumultuous and triumphant month in the history of the United States of America, in the course of Democracy, and in the affairs of freedom-loving people around the world.

- A four year Civil War grinding to conclusion
- The Great Emancipator silenced by an assassin's bullet, the Nation's first ever assassination of a President
- A noble surrender and a gracious acceptance at Appomattox
- A continuation of the Nation's experiment with self-governance
- And, the ongoing quest to become a more perfect Union.

Many have argued rightly that the month of April 1865 held both the agony and ecstasy of dreams of a United States of America too long deferred and hopes of a Union more perfectly realized. And of all the consequential decisions, interlocking destinies, era defining moments of the month – exquisitely chronicled by New York Times best-selling author Jay Winik in his acclaimed book "April 1865," – there is no mention of explosion of the Sultana Steamship, April 27, 1865, that marks still the greatest maritime disaster in our Nation's history.

This fact makes today's ground-breaking ceremony for the Sultana Disaster Museum all the more important, necessary and praiseworthy.

One Hundred Fifty-Seven years after that fateful day, April 27, 1865, we gather in year of our Lord, November 11, 2022, Veterans Day, to pay tribute to the more than 1,200 Union soldiers who lost their lives in the Mississippi River as a result of the explosion. We also respectfully and appropriately acknowledge the deeply-human and valiant response of this Southern region's residents who responded during the tragedy by putting themselves in danger in an effort to rescue and provide life-saving care to those who survived the blast.

That so few people know about this tragedy is partly and likely due to the chaos and uncertainty created by the gut-wrenching events of the month of April 1865, no less the loss of President Lincoln. And here, not solely because his tragic death understandably drew attention and sorrow elsewhere, as much as because we were not so fortunate to have his suffering heart, sobering voice and steadfast spirit to give expression and meaning to the tragedy. .

He was not there, as he was during his First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, when war was still smoldering in the distance, and he challenged his fellow Americans, North and South, to be guided by the "better angels of our nature."

He was not there, as he was at Gettysburg November 19, 1863, to eulogize our fallen comrades, North and South, as "not having died in vain;" and to remind us of the Nation's sacred "proposition that all men are created equal" and "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the Earth."

He was not there, as he was but fifty-four (54) days earlier, during the Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, when he could literally and gratefully sense that the end of the war was near and he sought to heal a divided-nation "with malice toward none, with charity to all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the Nation's wounds..."

For our purposes, Lincoln would have clearly grasped the sad irony of the Union soldiers, released as

prisoners of war, surviving the war, heading home, to be reunited with family and friends, finding their freedom's ship, the Sultana, turned into Dante's Inferno for all too many and with survivors finding rescue, shelter and safety among the outstretched arms and hands of "better angels."

God bless the memory of the soldiers of the Sultana Steamship on that fateful day, April 27, 1865.

God bless the "better angels," now among them [Rosaline O'Neal], who sought to rescue and serve any and all survivors.

God bless those gathered here this Veterans Day, to break ground on a lasting memorial museum to dedicate, to consecrate and to hallow this ground.