THE STEAMSHIP AMERICA.

Special History of the Origin and Progress of the Fire by Which the Vessel Was Lost.

"All Right" in the Evening, but a Dire Alarm in the Dead of Night.

Simple Origin of a Most Serious and Fatal Conflagration.

The Vessel Wrapped in Flames Suddenly.

DEFECTIVE HOSE AND NO WATER

Sad Scenes on Board and from the Shore.

Friendly Aid from Men-of-War's Men.

The Chinese Jumping to a Suicidal Watery Grave.

Loss of Life, Loss of Treasure and Loss of a Fine Ship.

HOW DID THE DISASTER OCCUR?

Official Investigation and Finding of the Court.

Description of the Scene by a United States Naval Officer.

How Our Youthful Tars Boarded and Manned the Burning Deck.

By HERALD special correspondence from Yokohama, Japan, under date of September 5, we have the following extended and complete report of the origin and progress of the fire on board the mail steamship America, by which that vessel, with very many human lives and a considerable amount of treasure, was lost. The HERALD writer supplies, also, a statement of the official inquiry which has been already made—another is probable—with the view of ascertaining the true cause of the calamity.

Burning of the Pacific Mail Steamship America.

YOKOHAMA, Sept. 5, 1872.

The Pacific mail steamship America, Captain Doane, arrived in port on the morning of August 24, after a pleasant voyage of 23 days across the Pacific ocean. Her passengers and cargo for Yokohama were all landed that day, and during the afternoon a few packages of cargo were taken in from this place for Hong Kong.

FIRE IN THE NIGHT AND THE SHIP WRAPPED IN FLAMES.

At eleven o'clock P. M. nearly all hands had retired to rest, as all the officers had been up the whole of the previous night, preparing to enter port. The Captain and first officer had gone their usual rounds and found everything all right. A few minutes past eleven, when the whole ship was hushed and quiet—nobody being around but the watchmen, the stewardess and the captain of the lighters—smoke was seen to issue from the side-lights of the ship and from the saloon, and immediately the terrible cry of "Fire!" rang through the ship.

All hands made the best of their way to where the fire was said to be.

It was certainly below the main saloon. The first people to get to the steerage appear to have been the first officer, Miller, and a quartermaster named Wilson. On the starboard side of the upper steerage some twenty bales of hay had been stowed, and these were found to be on fire. Although the smoke was very dense—as burning hay makes a rapid and suffocating smoke—all these first witnesses of the fire are of one mind, that the fire covered but a small space, two bales alone being apparently then on fire.

AFLOAT, BUT NO WATER.

The hose was immediately stretched and the nozzle pointed at the flames, when horror! there was no water. By this time the Captain and several others had reached the scene, while their enemy, the fire, was progressing with fearful rapidity. "Water, for God's sake!" shouted everybody. In about five minutes, to the joy of everybody, water came; but alas, only to mock their efforts, for a feeble stream played for about three minutes and then ceased. The truth then for the first time seemed to dawn upon those who were endeavoring to quell the fire—there was no steam to drive the pumps. Buckets were now drawn into play and thrown on the burning steerage deck from the main saloon, the deadlights of which leading to the steerage deck had been broken through.

By this time the fire had spread with fearful rapidity. It had taken possession of the whole of the after steerage, being fanned by a score of open ports and several ventilators, which caused a current of air through the steerage most favorable to the spread of a conflagration. The fire made its way along the narrow passages to the forward steerage and up to the main deck. Inch by inch the men were driven away from the steerage, from the saloon, from the main deck.

EXCITING SCENE IN THE HARBOR, BUT FRIENDLY AID OF NO AVAIL.

In less than twenty minutes from the first discovery of the fire the whole ship was full of suffocating smoke, and was afire its whole magnificent length. All over the harbor fire alarm bells were ringing, and the harbor was alive with boats; but so rapid was the fire that we have only heard of two boats being able to board the ship, one a cutter from the British man-of-war Rinaldo, and a sarpan, containing two officers of the United States ship Lackawanna, who happened to be passing on their way to their ship at the time. The futility of further fighting the fire soon impressed itself on the minds of all. One by one, as the officers and the men were beaten back by the flames, did they seek safety from the burning ship by jumping overboard or sliding down ropes.

At twenty minutes to twelve the Captain himself jumped for his life. He was the last to leave the ship. As he struck the water his limbs became paralyzed, and he would inevitably have drowned had not the friendly hand of Captain Williams, of the Costa Rica, seized him as he was about to sink for the third time.

THE CHINESE PASSENGERS RUSHING TO DESTRUCTION.

In the meantime there was terrible confusion among the 160 Chinese passengers forward. At the first alarm of the fire they commenced rushing on deck with their boxes and packages and effects. All rushed for the one ladder forward, generally used by the Chinese passengers. Upon this ladder some hundred were crowded, when the whole gave way by the falling of the boom above and all were precipitated headlong into the sea! The rest began to jump overboard or slide down ropes. Some threw their boxes overboard first and jumped after them. Others took what money they had—some as much as three thousand dollars—tied it round their waists, and, thus heavily weighted, jumped into the sea. To these circumstances must be attributed the great loss of life, for the water was perfectly calm, and the burning ship was surrounded by innumerable boats, the occupants of which did everything in their power to save life.

ITALIAN SHOT IN RELIEF.

After everybody had left the ship the launch of the Italian corvette Vittor Pisani came alongside and fired the contents of her howitzer into the ship, trying to sink her. But this was altogether futile, the shot having no effect upon the ship's sides.

Efforts had been made before the captain left the ship to flood the magazine, but this place was inaccessible. The tug was now alongside with a steam fire engine from shore, and although several streams of water were continually played upon her the ship burned all night and all next day, until five P. M., when there was little left to burn; and the rain, which accompanied a typhoon which blew for a few hours, deluged the wreck.

A GRAND BUT MOURNFUL SCENE.

The scene from shore was grand and terrible. Before it was known to the people of the settlement the fire had made great headway, and attempts to save her had been abandoned. Luckily for the rest of the shipping it was a dead calm, so that there was little danger of other vessels being injured by the burning ship.

On the afternoon of Sunday the moorings of the ship were cut away and she was towed over to Kanajawa. In doing so she fouled the Decapolis, but did her no damage. She then fouled the ship White Adder, some of whose headgear had to be cut away before the wreck drove past. She then got foul of the Thracian, and even set her on fire; but this was soon put out, and the Thracian, slipping her cables, got out of danger.

REMAINS OF THE MARINE STRUCTURE.

All that is left of the America is her funnel, her immense iron wheels and her iron bracing and copper. There is scarcely enough wood left to make a box of matches.

LOSS OF LIFE AND NUMBER OF THE VICTIMS.

The human victims to this disaster number fifty-nine, viz:—Fifty-three Chinese, three Japanese and three foreigners.

The foreigners were John H. Barker, engineers' storekeeper; Joseph Lymert, steerage watchman, and Thomas B. Cook (colored), steerage cook. All the bodies have been recovered.

TREASURE.

On the persons of the Chinese were found bags and pouches containing Mexican dollars, American gold coin and gold dust. About $7,000 has been recovered and is now in the hands of the United States Consul. Undoubtedly there must have been among the Chinese passengers a large amount of money—as Chinamen going home from California have usually managed to save from $500 to $5,000. This they always carry with them, never buying drafts or giving it to the purser for safe keeping; and there is no doubt that considerable of this money has been recovered and secreted away by wreckers. There were no European passengers on board at the time. All the Yokohama passengers had landed with their effects during the day. The Hong Kong and Shanghae passengers were ashore, but had left all their baggage on the ill-fated ship, and, of course, that was all lost.

There were about four hundred thousand dollars in treasure on board. This was placed in a large iron tank in the hold. The company's men are now at work on the wreck trying to get this tank up.

INQUIRY AS TO CAUSE.

How did the fire take place? When I saw Captain Doane next day and asked him this question he answered that he could only account for it in one of two ways—either it had been set on fire or it was the effect of spontaneous combustion. He was then under the impression that the fire commenced on the freight deck, and so expressed himself on the stand during the official investigation. But this theory was disproven by all the witnesses who saw the fire in its incipiency, and further by the facts that had it been on the freight deck it must have been some time before it could communicate to the steerage deck, where it was first seen, and during that time it would have exposed itself through the smoke that would have assuredly escaped by the ventilators that communicate with the hurricane deck. Again, on the freight deck were several boxes of cartridges which did not burn until about three o'clock the next morning, showing that the fire must have been communicated to that deck after its discovery on the steerage deck. It undoubtedly originated in the hay. How? It will be seen from the testimony adduced at the investigation that the steerage hatchway was the thoroughfare generally used for coolies, &c., going down to the freight deck to work. Now Japanese coolies will smoke wherever they have the opportunity, and they are extremely careless as to where they throw the still burning ashes. But we see that the coolies quit work at eight o'clock; and although they were at first allowed to stay on the steerage deck by the first officer, this order was rescinded, probably on account of that officer reflecting upon the combustible material that was in the steerage and on the habits of the Japanese, and at nine o'clock they were all driven out (as shown by the official investigation). But it is quite possible that one or two either stayed there to sleep or made their way to that place afterwards, for the steerage steward distinctly says that one knowing the ship could make his way there without being seen by the watchman, and the fact that the steerage watchman was not the first to give the alarm of fire, although it occurred at the place where he ought to have been on the lookout, and the further fact that he himself was burned, speak very little in favor of his care and watchfulness. Whether it was accident or design is more difficult of explanation. My own opinion is that one or two coolies had surreptitiously remained or crept there, realizing the fact that bales of hay made a softer bed than the boards of the deck, and that while there indulged in smoking and thus set fire to the ship.

The story told by the two sailors of the Lackawanna is altogether unworthy of credence; the conception of the romance was evidently after the fact and is to be attributed to that love of the romantic inherent in the breast of every sailor, especially a man-of-war's man. In the first place Japanese do never, in speaking among themselves, speak "pigeon English." On the contrary they invariably speak their own language, of which these men do not understand a word. Again, if there had been any design to burn the ship, where these sailors were would be the last place that the perpetrators would rush to to tell their design. Further, sailors are not noted for reticence. Yet this man Davis, as he testified, hears of a probable burning of an American ship, takes no interest in the matter, makes no inquiries, and in a room full of people only tells his chum of what he had heard. Chum again, not being bound to keep it quiet, nevertheless says not a word about it to any one, and, although the fire occurs that night, does not speak of it to a living soul, not even to the officers of his ship or his mates, until several hours after he has been on board the ship and two days after the fire, although they both saw the fire. Besides, the Japanese women alluded to were examined. None of them knew anything about the fire till next morning, and the only basis for the whole yarn is that when the sailors left the house the next morning one of the women said, "Big Melican ship makee burn." As the boys overnight had indulged in considerable firewater their recollections of the time when this occurred are not probably very distinct.

Another rumor got started around the settlement that the ship was set on fire by Japanese, from motives of revenge. It was stated that just before the Great Republic started on her last voyage to San Francisco a Japanese had been killed by two officers of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company on that ship, and his body had been sent ashore in a barrel, and several Japanese who had been witnesses to the deed were secured in the company's coal shed until the Republic got away. On investigation this turned out to be all "bosh." The whole absurd story had been founded on the bare fact that on board the Decapolis a Jap had been killed. An American who was engaged on the coal on that ship has been arrested, and he states that the man fell down the hold by accident. A full investigation into this matter has not yet been held; but it will probably turn out as the prisoner asserts.

HOW DID THE DISASTER HAPPEN?

Now arises the question, how did it happen that a ship like the America, well officered and manned, thoroughly equipped in all ways, should be completely destroyed by a fire, insignificant in its beginning, in the space of time little exceeding half an hour? The answer has been fully and unequivocally given by the witnesses at the investigation. There was no water! There was not sufficient steam to work the pumps to supply the water. After the fire the chief engineer well understood that inquiries would be made of him as to the reason that there was no available steam, and he felt that he was unable to satisfactorily answer those questions. When on the stand his manner was hesitating and confused; but he weakened his own cause by attempting to attribute the lack of water to other causes than to the absence of steam. His plea that the feed pipe might have burst or broken or fallen down, or that the joints had melted or burst, was absurd—was flatly contradicted by the testimony of facts by the different witnesses, and by none more unequivocally than by his own first assistant engineer. If any accident had occurred to the pipe how could water come through any one hose? Yet it was fully proved that one hose in the saloon and one on the hurricane deck did give water; and the captain states that that one on the hurricane deck was transmitting water when he deserted the ship. His statement that the one hose might have been connected with other sources of supply showed that he was ignorant of the machinery of the ship, for the captain, first officer and first assistant engineer all distinctly swear that there was but one source of supply for water throughout the whole ship. The theory of the hose valves being closed is flatly contradicted by the first officer and the captain. The first officer saw to the valves himself, and it is but natural to suppose that the veriest blockhead, in connecting a hose with the feed pipe, would see that the valve was open. The cause, therefore, of the fire becoming master so soon is attributable to the want of steam and to that alone. While there can be no doubt, therefore, as to this fact, the question of responsibility is debatable.

OFFICIAL PLEAS IN JUSTIFICATION.

The company has published a pamphlet containing certain rules to be observed by its officers. Rule 21 reads:—"When in port, except at Benicia, steam must be kept at all times to work the fire engine, with hose properly attached, &c. At night the first officer must see that every precaution against fire be taken; that a good watch is kept on deck; that the engine room has a light in it and one of the engineers on watch there."

Now, the first part of this order has been habitually broken. The chief engineer and captain testify that it has been usual in port to keep only ten or twelve pounds of steam on. This, as they admit, is not sufficient to work the pumps, &c. When the engineer was asked why he did not keep up full steam he answered that to keep up full steam all the time would necessitate constant blowing-off and consequent waste of steam and coal. Now, it is a well-known fact that economy in fuel is strictly enjoined on the engineers. This usage of the engineers of only keeping a half supply of steam on has more than probably been sanctioned by the company and its agents. For the lack of steam, therefore, the responsibility lies between the company and the engineer; and, in my opinion, the first should bear the heaviest brunt of the matter. Rule 76 reads:—"The senior engineer on watch is not to absent himself from the engine room without being relieved by another engineer, and he is to be particular that those under him do not leave their posts without permission." This, too, has been habitually ignored. In port, according to the sworn testimony, no engineer is on watch; the donkey boilers are in charge of a Chinese fireman, and upon these boilers depends the safety of the ship in an emergency like the fatal one we are chronicling. Whether the company are aware of the habitual breaking of this rule I do not know; if it is not, then the chief engineer is culpable.

Rule 82 reads, "The chief engineer is to see that the steam pumps and all pumps attached or to be attached are in an efficient state and at all times ready when required." For evident nonconformance with this rule the chief engineer is again at fault.

It might be asked why the lower cocks were not turned on and the ship flooded and sunk, thereby saving at least the hull of the ship, which could have been afterwards raised. Captain Done's answer to this is—"That at first his efforts were confined to attempts to put the fire out. When that was found to be impossible the lower decks were unapproachable." The great loss of life is without doubt attributable to the attempts of the Chinese to save their effects. Although several of them appeared in the Court and stated that when the alarm was first given if they had not been prevented by some Europeans from jumping overboard a great many more would have been saved. Nothing corroborating this could be elicited from the othe testimony. The Chinese admit that at one time there were over one hundred on the ladder. Of course the ladder broke. The probabilities are that if any such interference took place it was to warn them from crowding too much and attempting to save their baggage. Several of the bodies picked up had large bags of clothing tied on their backs. One thing certainly was neglected. Some officers should have been detached to see to the passengers and endeavor to get them all off the ship in an orderly manner; but there is no evidence that this was done.

THE COURT OF INVESTIGATION AND ITS FINDING.

The official investigation lasted nearly four days, but it was by no means a complete one. Many unnecessary questions were asked and many vital ones omitted. The United States laws for the government of passenger-carrying steamships were apparently not consulted. Besides, a certain tone of harshness was used by the President of the Court towards the witnesses entirely at variance with the usual suave manner of that gentleman. It had the effect of placing the witnesses on the defensive, they seeming to have a feeling that each individually was on trial for burning the ship. It is most probable that a more complete investigation will be held in New York, where expert shipmasters and engineers will be called upon for testimony. That the investigation here should have been incomplete is quite comprehensible. The Court cannot be expected to be thoroughly posted upon steamship matters, and there were few if any experts at his command. Nevertheless the Court evinced the utmost patience in trying to sift the matter, and if it did not thoroughly succeed but little blame can attach to it.

THE DECISION

rendered by the Court is a lengthy one, and decides nothing. It is a mere resumé of the testimony with the opinions of the Court attached. It seems to me they might have gone a little further. With the exception of very lightly reflecting "on the want of preparation or great tardiness" in the engineer's department, no blame is attached to anybody. Yet the Court finds "that notwithstanding all this capacity—referring to its capacity for putting out fire—steam was only on one donkey boiler, and, with a full head of steam, not more than five streams, altogether, could be supplied to extinguish a fire." Surely, somebody is to blame for this.

The Court finds that it is "usual to allow steam to go down on all boilers except the donkey boilers, when in port." If this be true, and the company is aware of this, then the company is responsible. If not, then it rests with the Captain and other officers of the ship.

Again, the Court finds that too much time and too many persons were occupied with the house, instead of forming lines with the buckets. Is nobody to blame for this? Is anybody to blame for the misapprehension as to the headway of the fire and the "confusion?" And, lastly, is no one to blame for the "unexpected failure of water?"

The "conviction" entertained by the Court that the fire was the work of an incendiary is scarcely borne out by the testimony. That it is quite possible and even probable is most true, but not more possible or probable that it was the result of an accident. There is no reason to suppose that any antipathy did exist "on the part of some person towards the Pacific Mail Steamship Company or some of its officers." And as to the fact that the few Chinese passengers were generally supplied with large sums of money—this is of monthly occurrence—every steamer brings more or less Chinamen.

The America was carrying an exceptionally small number of passengers—160 in all. However, as stated above, there is just as much reason to suppose that it was the action of some depraved wretch as to suppose it was the result of an accident. But whether it was the one or the other is destined, I am afraid, to remain forever a mystery.

The Official Investigation.

The Court consisted of Consul Shepard, presiding; Captain Paul Shirley, United States steamship Lackawanna; Captain Percy, American steamer Emperor.

United States Minister De Long occupied a seat on the bench, and from time to time made suggestions to the Court.

The Court convened August 31, 1872.

SETH DOANE'S TESTIMONY.

Captain Seth Doane being duly sworn, testified—Am a shipmaster; my last command was the Pacific Mail steamship Company's steamship America; was in command and on board at the time of the fire; I was asleep; was aroused by the first officer, who said the ship was on fire; as near as I can recollect it was a few minutes past eleven o'clock; six bells had struck; I rushed into the saloon; saw the hose stretched and men to quarters; each man has a station; (was shown a book of Regulations of the company which he recognized as such); pace 48 of said book is the Fire Stations bill; copies of these are posted all over the ship; I saw the flames through the deadlights of saloon deck; these deadlights were about half way between main and mizzen masts; saw the light of the flame through the deadlights; there was no other evidence of fire in the saloon as there was no outlet; saw men attempting to open the hatch leading down to the steerage deck; ordered them to desist and not to open the hatch till water came; I then passed into the ladies' saloon below; saw no smoke or other indications of fire there; then returned to main saloon, broke open a deadlight and led a hose down; there are five decks in the ship—orlop, freight, steerage, main and hurricane; the hold has three bulkheads and two compartments; space between orlop deck and freight deck is used for freight and coal; coal bunkers occupy space amidships alongside of engines; after bulkhead comes half way between main and mizzen masts; the space between freight deck and steerage deck is used for freight, that between steerage and main deck for passengers and freight; on this occasion there was only some hay in that part over the after compartment; the fire was discovered on steerage deck forward of after bulkhead, in middle compartment; it was directly over the space occupied by coal; it may have been over either or both compartments; could not tell exact situation of flames; soon after putting the hose down the deadlight the smoke and flames drove everybody away; I got on to the steerage deck through the side door, which is in about the middle of the ship; got nearly into forward part of steerage, but the smoke was so dense I could not stay; cannot say whether fire broke out on freight deck or steerage deck; cannot tell particularly what was burning, the whole deck was in a perfect sheet of flames; watchmen are stationed all over the ship; the steerage watchman was on watch at the locality of the fire; he has charge of that deck; the quartermaster on watch should go through there every half hour; when I was on steerage deck I drove the passengers out of the steerage and then went back into the saloon, thence to the upper deck, and started the hose through the ventilators; in case of fire it is the duty of the executive officer to proceed to the place of fire; I saw the first officer there; I think all the officers were at their posts; noticed none absent; when I first went into the saloon no water was passing through the hose; it was four or five minutes before water came; when the water did come it only lasted four or five minutes; only one hose was being played on the fire from the saloon; probably five or six hose were laid; as many as six should have played; only two sets of hose are supposed to be in the saloon; about twelve should be on the steerage deck; a large cast iron pipe runs through the steerage deck; at intervals of about ten feet there are taps for hose attachments; in case of fire all the taps should have hose attached leading to the fire; when the water stopped running through the hose we carried water in buckets for about ten minutes, but it having no effect this was stopped; the hose was not used afterwards; the reason that the water stopped running through the hose was that there was no power to drive the pumps; in port we should have steam enough on the donkey engine to drive all pumps; do not know whether there was steam enough to drive one pump; the engine fires are allowed to go out in port, but not that of the donkey engine; this is not sufficient to drive all the pumps; have no explicit instructions in the matter of keeping any amount of steam in port; instructions are that steam should always be on the donkey; do not know how much steam there was; am sure there was some steam; chief engineer has general orders to keep steam always; all the officers were on board at the time of the fire, except the doctor; there was a liferaft on the America, situated on the starboard guard; in this case it was not availed of, because nearly all the passengers were out of the ship before the rest of us ceased fighting the fire; second officer has charge of life rafts and boats; four boats were lowered; one was lowered at the very last thing by the first and second officers, assisted by an officer from the Lackawanna; these and the stewardess and some others got into that boat; I left the ship twenty minutes to twelve; I think that must have been the time, for my watch stopped at that time; I should judge I was on the ship half an hour after the alarm was given; I jumped overboard after the last-mentioned boat was clear of the ship; there was no hesitation on the part of the crew to obey orders; if a fire occurs at sea the steam power comes from the main boilers; the donkey is for use in port to handle cargo, drive pumps and so forth; the donkey is supposed to have sufficient power to drive pumps enough to put out fire; I have always gone through the fire drill at regular intervals; do not know of any fire having been in the galley after eight P. M.; first officer always inspects ship before retiring; I had inspected the ship myself that night at ten P. M.; lights were in the saloons; no open lights were allowed.

To Captain Percy—All the hose in the ship was not stretched; ordinarily carry from twenty-five to thirty pounds of steam on the donkey; had there been steam we should have got water; all the hose were available.

Mr. DeLong—What power *is* (*sic*) have you for putting out fire?

A. There are thirty-two sets of hose on the main and steerage decks, which can be attached to the large iron pipe which runs through the ship; at sea the pumps are supplied by main engines, in port by donkey engines; we had been sixteen or seventeen hours in port; the donkey engines, with twenty pounds of steam, could not supply all the hose; with everything in good working order we ought to have been able to play twelve streams of water on the fire; in my judgment there was not steam enough to drive pumps; water failed after four minutes, because steam failed; want of steam deprived us of power to fight the fire; there is no regulation as to how many pounds of steam should be kept; the chief engineer is ordered to keep steam; I went to the engineer and said, "By God, Graham, there is no water!" He made no reply; he rushed to the donkey boiler; no pumps were worked afterward; my opinion is the fire must have started on the freight deck; at half-past eleven o'clock an officer went through the steerage and found nothing; fire must have been general on the decks below, on all decks below there are facilities for injecting steam, but the fire was above; my opinion as to the cause of the fire is that it was either set on fire or it arose from the carelessness of the coolies who had been working on the freight deck by smoking; the second and third officers are in direct charge of the coolies supervised by the first; had there been steam on the donkey I doubt whether I could have put the fire out; such a fire could not have occurred at sea; there are valves to let in water to sink the ship; we might have opened them at first and sunk the ship, but this would have been attended with great loss of life; afterwards we could not get at them; in case of fire there are men stationed to lower boats; there are enough men to lower half the boats; all the boats were not lowered; there were any quantity of boats all round the ship; the bodies of fifty-three Chinamen, three Europeans and three Japanese have been found; most of the Chinamen lost their lives by attempting to save their effects; some of them jumped with their chests; the breaking of the forward gangway was caused by the rush of people on it; fifty-nine is the total of all lost; all the rest are accounted for; the coal put on board ship at San Francisco was mostly Australian coal, with some Liverpool coal.

JOSEPH HALLETT'S TESTIMONY.

Joseph Hallet, sworn—I was first officer of the steamship America at the time of the fire; I was in my room; I heard the quartermaster sing out "Fire in after steerage;" I rushed to that place and tried to get the hose that was hung up there, but could not on account of the smoke; tried again, but could not; I then went into the saloon; found the captain there with some hose; went on upper deck and found hose stretched, but there was no water passing through any; took my watch and set them to passing water with buckets; went to the hose again and found water in one on the hurricane deck; tried to lead it to the fire, but it was not long enough to reach the saloon; got another length and attached it, and put it down through the ventilator; I then saw the flames forward of the pilot house; played on that; told the captain I was afraid it was too late; captain ordered me to get the boats clear; I went to the boat on the port guard, cleared it and lowered it; was assisted by second officer and an officer from the Lackawanna; I slid down on the lower falls and the others on the after falls; before leaving I looked around but could see none on the ship; picked up some people from the water and pulled to a bark and put them on board; then went back to the ship to pick up more, but could see no more; the place around the ship was alive with boats; quartermaster Wilson first gave me the alarm; when I went below I could see nothing but smoke; I could smell the hay burning; I saw the flames through the dead lights of the saloon; I did not think the fire was below the steerage deck; I thought the hay was the principal thing burning; some ten minutes must have elapsed before water came through the hose; the only hose I saw water in was the one I had hold of; it was supplied from the pump by steam from the donkey boiler; I have not to inspect the engine room; I do not think there was steam on the donkey; if there was steam there would have been water; did not go into the engine room; when I first saw the fire if I had had water I could have put the fire out; three minutes only should elapse between the alarm and getting water; in this case ten minutes elapsed; my opinion is that the ship was lost from want of steam on the donkey engine; I consider the rules issued by the company ample and that they cover all the ground; had those rules been acted up to the ship would not have been lost; at sea I go round to inspect every hour; was in the steerage at nine o'clock; was on the freight deck also, but saw no evidences of fire; on the freight deck there were only a few cases of arms; the fire was back of the coal; we had been working that day on orlop and freight decks; we took nothing from the steerage deck; I had an opinion that the fire was caused by the carelessness of coolies; I at first was going to allow the coolies to remain on the steerage deck, but on consideration I removed them all to the main deck; some may have stopped there and smoked; I think it originated in the hay; the steerage watchman was in charge there; Quartermaster Wilson had orders to go through at ten; he went through at half-past ten; at six bells (eleven o'clock) he said he saw four bales of hay on fire, and gave the alarm; I immediately went to after steerage; cannot say whether all the officers were at their posts; saw the second officer and every body I had occasion to communicate with; I stayed on the deck half an hour; all hands did the best they could, obeyed all orders and were prompt; I think if the fire had caught on the freight deck we should have seen evidence of it through the ventilator on the hurricane deck; I consider I took all precautions against fire; no cargo was lying loose; the holds were all secure; if the fire occurred at sea it would have been subdued immediately; I am firmly of the opinion that when I first saw the fire it was confined to the hay; the cause of so many Chinamen losing their lives is owing to the fact that they tried to save their baggage; some were drowned by boxes being flung on them while in the water; know nothing about the breaking of the gangway ladder; there was a liberal supply of life preservers, about twelve hundred, convenient to steerage passengers; they are in a crib, with the words "Life preservers" in both English and Chinese on it; the valves were not open on steerage deck; were open on upper deck; I opened them myself on hurricane deck; there was no breakage that I know of in the pumps.

JOHN GRAHAM'S TESTIMONY.

John Graham sworn:—Was chief engineer of America at the time of the fire; was on board at the time; have been in the employ of the company, off and on, for twenty-two years as chief engineer; soon after six bells struck aboard a person called me; I dressed and went up to see what it was; went into main saloon; saw the flames through the deadlights; then went forward to see if assistant engineers were at their stations; three were at pumps amidships, two were in the donkey room; went to see if water was running through hose; went to the upper deck and found water going through the outboard discharge; had that closed and went back to main deck and found water running through hose; went forward again to donkey room; staid there till the smoke and flames drove me out; I think it was Captain Miller that gave the alarm; in case of fire in port have no particular station, the main engine not being used; I was cool and collected; did go into the engine room; we had fires and steam on the donkey boilers; twelve pounds of steam were reported to me; we do not use donkey engines for handling cargo; have not been in the habit of doing so; they are used for feeding boiler, pumping up water, &c.; there are thirty-two connections for hose in the ship; the donkey is not powerful enough to feed them; with twenty pounds of steam can throw five jets; when the fire broke out there was twelve pounds of steam on and it was rising; with twenty pounds of steam could throw water forty to fifty feet; we are required not to exceed twenty pounds of steam; generally carry twelve pounds in port when the watch is set; that is the rule on all ships that I have been in; the outboard valves are generally opened before we start the pumps, and afterwards are closed; I heard the people cry out there was no water, and I found none in the gangway; the fifth assistant engineer was on watch; the engineers, storekeeper and China firemen were with him to look after the the donkey; gave first assistant engineer, that night before going to bed, orders about coal, none as to steam; it is left to the engineer's judgment as to how much steam should be kept; can't always keep twenty pounds on, because it would be inconvenient to those on board, requiring constant blowing off, and would be expensive to the company; I have not received any written instructions from the company for four or five years; I do not consider twelve pounds of steam sufficient in case of fire; the fifth assistant was on watch receiving coal; we keep no engineer in engine room in port; the engineer on watch was supposed to be looking after the donkey engine and coaling; all the pumps were not connected, because the boilers were not sufficient to keep them going; my first assistant was at the engine room door; the steam pumps were over forward main boilers; first assistant's station is at pumps; sixth assistant, I think, was looking after the hose; the fireman is a Chinaman; I have not seen him since the fire.

To Mr. De Long:—Do not know of my own knowledge how much steam there was; twelve pounds was reported to me; did not see the gauge; was not aware that water had stopped running through the hose after it first started; heard some one cry out there was no water; did not go to the donkey engine at any time; as to steam he had only given general orders while he was on the ship to keep twelve pounds of steam on, except when cooking, then to have twenty pounds; this general order is generally understood by the engineers; about five minutes only elapsed between the closing of the outboard discharge and the water being in the hose; saw water flowing through two pipes; all the pumps lead to the main pipe on the steerage deck where the hose attachments are; the second assistant was in the eyes of the ship; it takes from thirty to forty-five minutes to get up steam on donkey boilers; we only keep steam on one boiler in port; do not think that all the steam power in the ship could have put the fire out; have been on board several ships while on fire.

Lieutenant Durnford and Sub-Lieutenant Williams, of Her Majesty's steamship Rinaldo, were then sworn, but their testimony threw no light on the matter, as they came to the ship too late to render any assistance.

Many of the under officers and employés were next examined, but their evidence was principally to the same effect as that of their superiors.

UNITED STATES NAVY OFFICERS ON THE STAND.

J. Field, Lieutenant United States steamship Lackawanna—Going off to Lackawanna in company with Mr. Klapp, captain's clerk, saw the fire on the America and pulled towards it; got on board and saw hose stretched, but there was no water; found one hose on the hurricane deck that had water; we helped to lower a boat and put the stewardess into it; picked up several people who were in the water; was of the opinion that he was one of the first to get on board the burning ship; was of the opinion that if all the hose had been in play when he saw the fire it would have been useless; escaped himself by sliding down the boat's falls.

Frederick Klapp, captain's clerk of the Lackawanna, was called, but his testimony was of no importance.

CHINESE TESTIMONY.

Ta Sin (warned to speak the truth)—Was fireman on board the America; was at the donkey engine amidships on the main deck at the time of the fire; duty was to attend the fire at the donkey boiler; when the alarm was given there was fifteen pounds of steam on; had had fifteen pounds all night; afterward it went down to fourteen pounds; four or five minutes afterward went up to sixteen or seventeen pounds; the highest it ever reached was eighteen pounds; chief engineer had told him to keep fifteen pounds on all night; was alone on duty there all night; was always alone on duty in port; at sea there are several firemen on duty at the same time; in port sometimes the third assistant engineer is with us; stayed by the donkey about twenty minutes after the fire occurred; then jumped overboard.

Then again came officers and officials of the America.

Hallett upon being re-examined, said that there were thirty-five bales of hay in the steerage; it was kept for the feeding of the cattle on the homeward trip; it was kept in the after steerage, because that was considered the safest place for it; any person could have got into the steerage on the night of the fire.

Here the testimony closed.

The Court retired for deliberation and then recorded the following

Decision.

We, the undersigned, comprising the Court of Inquiry assembled at the United States Consulate in Yokohama, Japan, on the 31st day of August, 1872, to inquire into the cause of the loss of the steamship America, having heard and carefully considered all of the testimony adduced in the case, do find as follows:—

That the steamer America arrived at this port and anchored about seven o'clock on the morning of August 24, 1872. That, as usual with ships of that line when in this port, all steam was allowed to go down except in one so-called "donkey boiler." That when in port steam is only up in this boiler for the purpose of hoisting cargo, pumping the ship, pumping boilers and working the fire pumps. That, with steam on the main boilers, the full capacity of fire-extinguishing apparatus on board this vessel was thirty-two streams, together with a complete supply of hose to reach any portion of the vessel and flood the same if desired. In addition to this we find that arrangements existed for ejecting steam directly from the main boilers to between the freight and orlop decks and also below the orlop deck, so as at once to smother any fire in such portion of the vessel. That, notwithstanding all this capacity, steam was only on this one donkey boiler, and that with a full head of steam not more than five streams altogether could be supplied by this boiler to extinguish a fire. That an iron pipe, some six inches in diameter, extended fore and aft in this vessel, with hose attachments to accommodate every portion of the ship. That all fire pumps on the vessel connected with and supplied this pipe. That a full supply of fire hose, all in good order and conveniently situated, was on hand. That the after steerage or second cabin of this vessel was unoccupied during the voyage from San Francisco to this port, and was also unoccupied during the day and evening of this fire. That this compartment of the ship was very extensive, having numerous ports opening into it, and three large ventilators leading from it through the decks above. That as usual, when in port, the weather being fine, these ports were left open. That this compartment of the vessel was lined with staterooms constructed of pine wood and having no doors. That there was also in this compartment a large number of standie berths of like material and piled up as loose lumber. That near the after part of this after steerage a hatchway led to the freight deck below. That near this hatchway in this after steerage, and on the port side of the vessel, were piled about thirty five bales of hay for use on the homeward voyage. That this hay was piled in rows, three bales deep, and was nearly under the dead-lights of the main deck, which dead-lights ran through the centre of the cabin dining saloon. That during the day of arrival all freight for this port had been discharged, and some freight for Hong Kong received and placed on the after freight deck under this after steerage; that this freight consisted of some large cases, several bags of rice and three boxes of cartridges; that in going to and from this freight deck this hatchway leading into the after steerage had been during the day used as a thoroughfare; that while this freight was being received and discharged a careful watch was kept to prevent the laborers from smoking, and by nine o'clock on that evening all work had been stopped in that portion of the vessel, the hatchway carefully closed and locked, thus cutting off all communication after that hour with the after freight deck, which compartment of the vessel had no ports, but did have one ventilator leading up through the hurricane deck; that at half-past nine, at ten and half-past ten o'clock of the evening in question this after steerage was visited by the proper officers on watch, all of whom failed to detect any evidence of fire or the presence of any person, and reported "All well." That at the last mentioned time the steerage steward with a closed light carefully examined this hay to see if any person was lying sleeping about it. That he was immediately followed or preceded by the quartermaster on watch, who, without a light, carefully inspected this part of the vessel; and it seems to us that if any fire had then been in this after steerage it must have been observed. That during the evening coal was being received into the vessel forward, and, for some reason seemingly insufficient to us, the sixth engineer—the only engineer then on duty in the ship—was attending to the receiving and stowing of this coal, leaving a Chinese stoker alone on watch in the donkey boiler room; that such was the condition of affairs at eleven o'clock of this evening, when Quartermaster Wilson after striking "six bells" proceeded on his tour of inspection, and upon reaching the main deck and nearing the dining saloon, he with the stewardess and others detected the smell of smoke—glanced over the side of the vessel, saw smoke issuing from the after-steerage ports; rushed at once below into the after steerage and there saw fire in the two upper tiers of this hay; that this fire then occupied a space less than three feet square, and not being connected with any woodwork of the ship; that immediately a general alarm in the ship was given, and most of the officers and crew at once put forth every effort in their power to subdue the flames; that under the direction of the first officer a fire hose was stretched to the after steerage, the valve turned on and the water awaited, but none came before the smoke and flames drove him and his assistants above that deck. That under the supervision of Captain Doane, four lines of hose were at once stretched in the main saloon, the valves opened and water there awaited for some minutes. That eventually—and for a short time only—a little came through one line of the hose and then failed, no more coming through any hose until they also were abandoned, the captain and crew being driven by the flames to the hurricane deck. That here another length of hose had been stretched, the first officer when driven from the steerage taking charge of it; but through this also no water came until the flames had complete possession of the vessel below the hurricane deck. That from that time the supply through this one line of hose was found continued to pour through it until the ship was abandoned. To our minds this fact proves the fire pumps and supply pipe of the vessel to have been in good working order, and the presence of water for a few moments through one line of hose in the cabin is proof that steam was so low in the donkey boiler that when turned on supplied one stream for a very few minutes only, and then fell so low as to be useless, until just before the ship was abandoned.

We are of opinion that the long time which elapsed before even this one stream was started denotes great want of preparation or great tardiness in the engineer's department, and we entertain no doubts that if steam to the amount of twenty pounds or more had been on the donkey boiler at the time alarm was given the fires under that boiler in proper condition, and proper expedition used in getting the fire pumps at work, the fire might have been extinguished and the ship saved. We are of opinion that because of the peculiar location of the fire—the very combustible material in which it commenced—a general misapprehension as to its headway prevailed on all hands, resulting in some confusion. There seems to us to have been too many people for too long a time engaged at the hose waiting for water, and too great delay in organizing lines with buckets. In fact, it seems to us that the glare of this light on the large