


*THE EVENTS FROM ONE OF THE DEADLIEST, MOST  
HORRIFYING RAILROAD DISASTERS IN U.S. HISTORY*

THE 1876  
**ASHTABULA  
DISASTER**



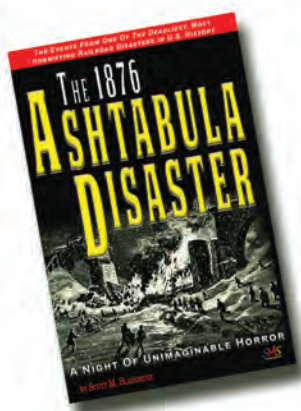
**A NIGHT OF UNIMAGINABLE HORROR**

BY **SCOTT M. SLAUGHTER**

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Thank you for purchasing *The 1876 Ashtabula Disaster*. I hope you enjoy it and learn more about this tragic, horrifying railroad disaster.

When you have a moment, please visit my website ([scottslaughter.com](http://scottslaughter.com)) for information on my other railroad and train books along with other information about railroads.



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# Overview



## OVERVIEW

**A**SHTABULA IS LOCATED IN Ashtabula County, Ohio, at the mouth of the Ashtabula River on Lake Erie, about 50 miles northeast of Cleveland (see the following map). The name Ashtabula comes from a Leni Lenape word that means, quite optimistically, “always enough fish to be shared around.”

Ashtabula was an important stop on the Cleveland, Painesville, & Ashtabula Railroad (CP&A) that opened in 1852. The CP&A operated initially from Cleveland, Ohio, to the Ohio-Pennsylvania border and became one of the most profitable railroad lines in the United States in the 1860s, particularly after it was completed between Buffalo, New York, and Chicago, Illinois.

The CPA was also informally known as either the Cleveland & Erie Railroad, the Cleveland & Buffalo Railroad, or the Lake Shore Railroad up to 1868 when the CPA was officially renamed the Lake Shore Railway. It merged with the Michigan Southern & Northern Indiana Railroad in 1869 to form the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railroad (LS&SM).

## ● Overview Of The Disaster ●

**E**ven though there were other horrifying accidents on railroad bridges or trestles in the 1800s in the U.S., it's unlikely that any of those accidents, such as the Angola Horror (December 18, 1867) and the South Norwalk Disaster (May 6, 1853), combined more elements of sheer horror or created more public outpouring of emotion than what happened on the frozen Ashtabula River in Ashtabula, Ohio, on the evening of Friday, December 29, 1876.

Furthermore, no railroad disaster prior to December 1876 generated more interest across the United States at the time than did the Ashtabula Disaster. The accident was, indeed, so terrible in its scope and so heart-rending in its details, that newspapers across the country replaced their headlines on the other news of the day with stories, articles and updates about the accident in the main headlines of the newspapers at the time.

The news of the Ashtabula Disaster appeared in many newspapers across the country and even shared the headlines with the big national news stories at the time. (Perhaps the most important national story at the time was the growing dispute over the recent presidential election in the United States. The elections in 2008 and 2016 notwithstanding, the 1876 presidential election was one of the most disputed in American history. Samuel Tilden of New York won the popular vote, and led with 184 electoral votes to Rutherford B. Hayes' 165, with 20 votes uncounted. The question of who should have been awarded the uncounted electoral votes is the source of the continued controversy concerning the results of the 1876 election. They were eventually given to Rutherford N. Hayes in an agreement known as the Compromise of 1877.)

Because it was the deadliest railroad disaster to that time in the United States, it has been known by various names, including the Ashtabula Train Disaster, Ashtabula Railroad Disaster, the Ashtabula Disaster, or the Ashtabula Horror. While all the names are appropriate, they cannot by themselves fully describe what happened that night.

Although this was the deadliest railroad disaster to that time in the United States, and arguably the most horrible transportation disasters of all time in the U.S., it wasn't just the cold statistics that shocked the country. It was instead how dozens of the passengers perished in the disaster, why did the iron bridge suddenly collapse, questions on how safe the bridge really was, why wasn't the fire put out so that rescue efforts could begin to locate and free several trapped passengers, and other suspicions and all had a strong affect on how Americans thought about transportation, which in the late 1870s meant railroads. It was similar to the affect the sinking of the "unsinkable" RMS *Titanic* had on passenger ships about 36 years later.

The slow wintery trip had also become a long, gloomy adventure for many of the dozens of passengers aboard the *Pacific Express*. Most passengers found different ways to stay busy to pass the time. Some passengers, for example, played card games as a way to stop thinking about the train being so far behind in its schedule. Meanwhile, even though they could do little more than the wind-driven snow outside their train, other passengers spent their time staring vacantly out the windows. All the passengers, however, must have some level of anxiety or concern over the increasing delays caused by the weather.

Despite the weather conditions, which would certainly make for “white-knuckle excitement” in driving an automobile in similar conditions today, the trip for Dan McGuire, who was the engineer of the lead locomotive, *Socrates*, was actually more routine, if not unexciting, as he cajoled the train through the blinding snow and darkness hour after hour as it slowly made its way west.

The routine, however, changed abruptly just as the *Pacific Express* was crossing over the Ashtabula River at about 7:30 P.M., Dan McGuire, the engineer on the lead locomotive *Socrates* suddenly heard a loud, sharp, sickening crack. He felt a sensation that was so strange he could only explain it by thinking the *Socrates* was “running uphill” even though it was still on the bridge. He, however, soon understood the Ashtabula Bridge was cracking and breaking apart directly below him. He pulled the throttle wide open; the burst of momentum pushed the locomotive onto the west abutment of the collapsing bridge.

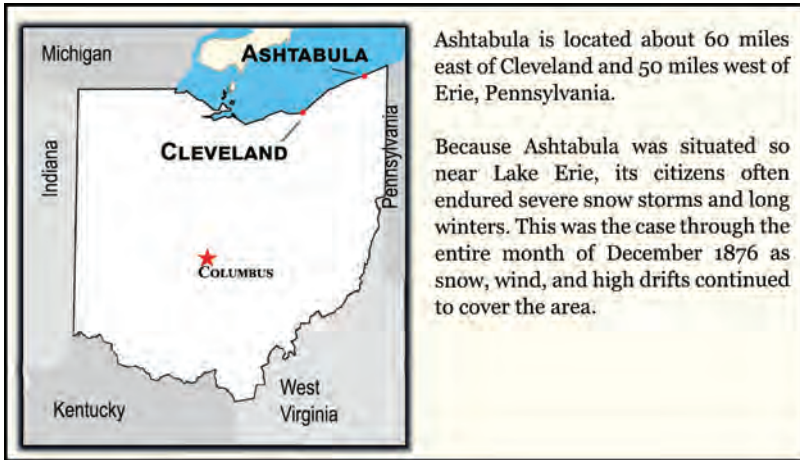
McGuire coaxed the *Socrates* to the relative safety of the abutment but the trailing locomotive *Columbia* and the rest of the train fell about 80 feet onto the frozen water.

Despite the darkness and the swirling snow, several people waiting at the station watched in stunned horror as the train simply disappeared into the darkness. Other people in Ashtabula had heard the thunderous crashing sounds echoing through the ravine. But within just a few minutes it all turned much worse when the sky above the ravine began glowing red from fires ignited by overturned potbelly stoves and broken kerosene lamps. Even the howling wind wasn’t able to muffle or quiet the screams of trapped passengers who watched the out-of-control flames approach them.

By the time the townspeople reached the bridge, the injured passengers had made their way to either side of the river as the fire continued growing in intensity.

The LS&MS railroad officials emphatically insisted putting water on the fire would be pointless, even though passengers were still trapped in the burning wreckage, while just as emphatically insisting priority should be given to rescuing and removing injured passengers. Ashtabula Fire Department Knapp agreed with the LS&MS officials and the fire engines were returned to their respective stations.

Ashtabula didn’t have a hospital in 1876 to care for the injured passengers, though to be fair, any hospital in the area would’ve soon been overwhelmed with the injured, dying, and those already dead.



Ashtabula is located about 60 miles east of Cleveland and 50 miles west of Erie, Pennsylvania.

Because Ashtabula was situated so near Lake Erie, its citizens often endured severe snow storms and long winters. This was the case through the entire month of December 1876 as snow, wind, and high drifts continued to cover the area.

Ashtabula was also important in the years leading up to the U.S. Civil War as a crucial destination on the Underground Railroad in the mid-1800s. The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and safe houses used by African-American slaves to escape into free states and Canada. Even though Ohio was a free state before the Civil War, refugee slaves in Ohio were still at risk of being captured by slave catchers so they took boarded ships to cross Lake Erie to freedom in Canada.

**A**bout 3,500 residents lived in Ashtabula at the time of the disaster, with another 500 or so other people living in a nearby small village at the mouth of the Ashtabula River.

Many European immigrants, particularly from Finland, Sweden, and Italy, came to the Ashtabula area in the mid-1800s through to the late-1800s looking for work in the many industrial jobs available in the area in the post-Civil War industrial boom occurring in the Great Lakes area.

Several small businesses were operating in Ashtabula at the time of the disaster, including a few saloons and three hotels — the American House, the Culver House, and the Eagle Hotel — that operated near the train station. The Eagle Hotel, in particular, had an important role in the hours following the disaster.



# The Ravine And The Bridge



## THE RAVINE AND THE BRIDGE

**T**O BETTER UNDERSTAND THE geography near the disaster scene, this chapter provides information about the ravine, which was formed by the high and steep banks of the Ashtabula River, and that survivors had to climb to escape the carnage despite the deep snow covering the entire area — and many not wearing proper clothing to handle the cold temperatures.

Also to better understand the reasons and causes of the disaster, the chapter also details the history of the bridge itself and in particular, its designer/builder Amasa Stone.



### ● The Ravine ●

**T**he banks along the valley of the Ashtabula River were, at the time of the disaster high, steep, and featured rocky cliffs. They formed a ravine in the rear, or in a southerly direction from the village, in an area the locals called “the gulf.” The ravine widened near the Ashtabula station, and its banks became relatively less steep, although still too steep, rocky, and covered with brush to climb easily. The Ashtabula River flowed at least 76 feet below the level of the LS&MS bridge, and was often about four feet deep.

Because the area at the bottom of the ravine was often inaccessible, or at least barely accessible, there was seldom a good reason for most people to visit that particular area near the bridge. The only structure near the river in this area of the ravine was an engine house and even though it was a rather nondescript building, the engine house was very important to the people of Ashtabula. A huge boiler and steam engine inside this building were used to pump water from the river to two large cisterns for the water supply of Ashtabula. These cisterns were located above the ravine and on either side of the LS&MS railroad track.

The location of the engine house near the river and near the bridge also became very important during the critical minutes and hours following the December 29, 1876, disaster because it served as a shelter, even a sanctuary, for those who had survived the disaster to that point from the deadly combination of fiery inferno and the cold, snowy weather.

In addition to the engine house at the bottom of the ravine, a second engine house was located near the cisterns on top of the ravine. Even though this engine house also served as a shelter for those who made it to the top of the ravine, it became known more for its part in the enduring controversy about the disaster because it's also where a manual fire engine called the "Lake Erie" was kept and maintained.

The "Lake Erie" and its hose, which officials could have attached to the steam pump in time to save lives, however, weren't used to put out the fire. Instead, the controversial decision was to first help rescue passengers who weren't trapped in the wreckage and not to fight the fires approaching the dozens of passengers who remained trapped in the wreckage.

The investigations following the disaster put the "responsibility for not putting out the fire at the time it first made its appearance in the wreck rests upon those who were the first to arrive at the scene of the disaster, and who seemed to have been so overwhelmed by the fearful calamity that they lost all presence of mind and failed to use the means at hand ..." The investigations also concluded that "nothing should have prevented the chief fireman from making all possible efforts to extinguish what fire then remained. For his failure to do this he is responsible."<sup>1</sup> (See the "Investigations, Allegations, And Denials" chapter for more information.)

**I**t's difficult to imagine an area that was more off the beaten track or one that was in a such god-forsaken spot — particularly in the winter months — than this ravine under the bridge. The only way to reach the bottom of the ravine and get to the river was to climb up/down a long flight of stairs. These stairs, however, weren't necessarily designed for public access, but instead for workers to get to the engine house at the bottom of the ravine. Even though climbing up and down



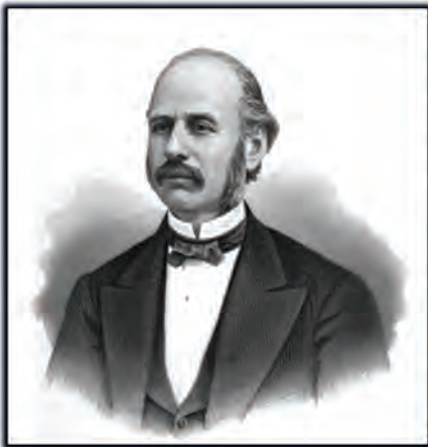
the steep, narrow stairs wasn't easy at any time of the year, the steps were covered under several inches of snow and ice at the time of the disaster and therefore even more perilous for anyone to climb.

The more adventurous way of reaching the river was following a winding, rough, and uneven path, although calling it a path might have redefined the meaning of a path. It was difficult to follow for men and even the best horses in the summer let alone in the cold, windy, deep snow, blizzard-like conditions the survivors and rescuers faced following the Ashtabula Disaster. However, there was no alternative, and the path was at least wide enough for a team of horses to make it down the steep banks to get to the ravine and the river.

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## • Amasa Stone And His Bridge •

**A**masa Stone (1818-1883) was an American industrialist who is best remembered for beginning a regional railroad empire, which was centered in Ohio, from 1860 until his death in 1883. For example, Stone had by the 1850s become a director of the Cleveland, Columbus & Cincinnati (CCC) Railroad and the Cleveland, Painesville, & Ashtabula (CPA) Railroad. The CPA merged with the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railway, of which Stone was appointed director. Stone was also a director or president of several other railroads in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.



Amasa Stone (1818-1883) was an American industrialist who is best remembered for being director of the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railway. He was also a director or president of several railroads in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Michigan.

Stone is also remembered for building hundreds of bridges in New England in the 1840s, and the LS&MS bridge over the Ashtabula River in the 1860s.

He began working for his brother-in-law, William Howe and his eponymous truss bridges, in 1839. Stone was an important part of a team that in 1840 built a railroad bridge over the Connecticut River in Springfield, Massachusetts. The reason this bridge is so noteworthy was that it was the first Howe truss bridge, which was a new, influential design in railroad bridges. Howe patented the design in 1840.

Stone purchased the rights to Howe's patented bridge design in 1842 and with a Springfield businessman named Azariah Boody formed Boody, Stone & Company, which erected several Howe truss bridges throughout New England.

Stone dissolved the Boody, Stone & Company by early 1847 only to turn around and purchase the Howe Bridge Works (founded in 1840 by his brother-in-law William Howe). This firm continued to construct bridges in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island until 1849.

Stone went on to design and build hundreds of bridges in New England in the 1840s, most of which were of the Howe truss bridge design. He was by 1850 recognized as the most eminent bridge builder and railroad contractor in New England.

**When Stone was president** of the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railway in the early 1860s he began thinking about replacing the original LS&MS wooden railroad bridge over the Ashtabula River. Although it might not have been quite an obsession for him to do so, he was certainly preoccupied with the idea.

It, therefore, didn't surprise many LS&MS officials, nor people in Ashtabula, when he announced his plan in 1863 to replace the bridge, even though that meant construction of the bridge would take place in the middle of the U.S. Civil War. However, what might have surprised some people, particularly LS&MS officials, was that Stone would personally oversee both the design and the erection of the new bridge. In other words, he'd be using his own bridge design ideas.

Stone had, in reality, little choice but to build the bridge there because to do so otherwise would require relocating/relaying all the track leading to the bridge, even though, as suggested earlier, it was still a rather foreboding place to build a new bridge. Nevertheless, it's the spot Amasa Stone and the LS&MS decided to erect their bridge ... the bridge that would eventually become part of U.S. railroad history.

The key section on Stone's new design was the 154-foot long middle span, which was an unusual length in the late 1800s, that rested on two stone abutments that could only have been built after an extensive fill had narrowed the ravine.

# The Night Of A Perfect Winter Storm



## THE NIGHT OF A PERFECT WINTER STORM

**G**USTAVUS D. (G. D.) Folsom, the engineer aboard the *Columbia* would later testify to The Legislature of Ohio Joint Committee Investigation that as the *Pacific Express* arrived in Ashtabula, “It was storming very bad. I could not tell precisely when I was on the bridge ... I think it was the worst storm I ever experienced on the Lake Shore ... ”<sup>1</sup>

In today’s terms, we might call the evening of Friday, December 29, 1876, as a “perfect storm” for a railroad disaster because everything in Ashtabula seemed to conspire in making the evening a harbinger of doom.

The people who live on the east side and the south side of the Great Lakes, including Ashtabula County in Ohio, are accustomed to dealing with large amounts of snow throughout the winter months and occasional bad snowstorms or blizzards driven by the warmer waters of the Great Lakes. December 1879 was, however, a little more extreme than other months and years because the people in the Ashtabula area were forced to deal with enormous blizzards and snowstorms each weekend so far that December.

However, the snowstorm on December 29 was more furious than the previous weekend storms that month. The snow started falling early in the morning but the storm by early afternoon had turned into a fearful combination of cold temperatures, strong, fierce winds, and snow — a lot of snow. It only changed in intensity from

strong to very strong through the afternoon. The snowfall rate was so great during the day it became futile for anyone to shovel or push the snow from around their houses or attempt to clear the streets.

The blizzard hammered the area from the late afternoon into the early evening with more than 20 inches of new snow and strong winds with gusts as high as 50 miles an hour that created many whiteout conditions in the area.

High, wide, deep drifts filled the streets and a deep blanket of snow covered everything in the area ... trees, houses, sheds, businesses, buildings, and fences stood like silent forms in the snowy landscape. It must have been an impressive sight.

Because the area was still covered with snow from the earlier storms that month, the new snow that fell during the December 29 storm only added to the heavy blankets of white snow that already covered the area.

The people living in the area had, for the third time during that month of December, understandably remained safe and warm inside their homes, and couldn't (or simply didn't want to) bother clearing the paths from their front doors to the gates. They chose to remain inside, trying to stay warm and comfortable around their fireplaces. Except for the sound from the gusty, cold winds, an eerie quiet descended upon the area, perhaps another harbinger of doom.

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## • The Train And Its Crew •

**T**he Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railway (LS&MS), which was established in 1833, was a major part of the so-called Water Level Route of the powerful New York Central Railroad from Buffalo, New York, to Chicago, Illinois. It was called the Water Level Route for a good reason: Its route mostly followed the south shore of Lake Erie (in New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio, with some branches and other lines heading north into Toledo and Michigan) and across northern Indiana into Chicago.

The LS&MS No 5 train, which was called the *Pacific Express*, was known as a crack train, which meant it was the fastest express train between two stops. It was also well-known at the time for its elegance, power, and beauty.

The *Pacific Express*, perhaps ironically named considering the weather conditions through which it was travelling to Chicago, consisted of the following locomotives and railcars as it made its way west through the snowstorm:

- Two locomotives: *Socrates* (leading) and *Columbia* (trailing) and their respective tenders

- Two express cars (Although express cars resembled baggage cars, railroads used them to carry more valuable freight in passenger train consists.)
- Two baggage cars
- One smoking car
- Two day passenger coaches
- Three sleeper cars: the New York sleeper *Palatine*; the Boston sleeper *City of Buffalo*; and the Louisville sleeper *Osceo*.
- One drawing-room car: the *Yokahama*. (The drawing-room car was part of certain passenger train accommodations, designating some of the most spacious and expensive private accommodations available on board a sleeping car or private railroad car.)
- Caboose

**T**he crew of the train included the following men as it made its way to Ashtabula and, ultimately, into railroad history:

- Dar, James (Porter Sleeping Car)
- Folsom, G. D. (Engineer on trailing locomotive *Columbia*)
- Henn, B. (Conductor)
- Karn, Charles (Porter Sleeping Car)
- Lannegan, Lawrence (Expressman)
- Levenbroe, Peter (Fireman on trailing locomotive *Columbia*)
- McGuire, Dan (Engineer on leading locomotive *Socrates*)
- McNeill, Phil (Unknown job)
- Purington, George (Expressman)
- Stewart, Jerry (Porter Sleeping Car)
- Stone, A. L. (Brakeman)
- Vosburgh, W. H. (Brakeman)
- Wagner, Harry (Conductor of Sleeping Cars)
- Webb, James (Porter Drawing Room Car)
- Unnamed Fireman (Fireman on leading locomotive *Socrates*)

Because the LS&MS didn't have an "official" passenger list for the *Pacific Express*, there's no way to know with 100 percent accuracy how many passengers were aboard the train. Most sources believe the number of passengers was 159 but some estimates dramatically increased the number to as high as 250 passengers. Regardless of whether 159 or 250 passengers were aboard the train, or somewhere in-between those numbers, many of its passengers were travelling to enjoy the company of relatives and friends for the holidays.

**T**he Lake Shore & Michigan Southern *Pacific Express*, which had departed New York the night before, had been divided at Albany; a portion of it was plowing through the snowdrifts of the mountains in Vermont, and another portion was struggling just as hard through the snow near the banks of Lake Erie.

The westbound *Pacific Express* departed Buffalo, New York, at about 3:00 P.M. on December 29, 1876, during a blinding northeasterly snowstorm that was driven by high, gusty, and unpredictable winds. The weather was so bad and the snow and drifts so deep on the tracks that four pusher locomotives were needed to help the train out of Buffalo.

The biting wind and several inches of snow, and even higher snowdrifts, that covered the tracks continued to bedevil the *Pacific Express* as it struggled to maintain a speed between 12 to 15 miles an hour to reach its scheduled stop at Erie, Pennsylvania, before making its way to its next stop at Ashtabula, Ohio.

The *Pacific Express* was due in Erie shortly after 12:00 noon, but the snowstorm put the train so far behind schedule it was 2½ hours late. The weather conditions meant it was likely to be even further behind schedule by the time it reached Ashtabula, especially considering it was making its scheduled stops along the line.

The snow was so deep in Erie that additional locomotives were needed to push the train out of the Erie Station, similar to what happened when the train was trying to depart Buffalo. This delay in Erie meant that the *Pacific Express*, which was already far behind schedule by the time it departed Erie, would continue falling even further behind schedule as it headed west. It should have, for example, reached Ashtabula before sunset, but as the train was still pushing forward, the sun had already set and early evening had descended on Ashtabula. (Remember this was late December so the sun had set by late afternoon and by early evening it would be dark enough for workers to light the oil lamps to provide light at the station.)

The weather meant the *Socrates* and the *Columbia* locomotives were, in a very real sense, doing double duty: They, of course, had to pull the long train behind them, but they also had to push forward through the deep, blowing snow. Each of the four locomotives strained for every possible bit of steam they could generate so they'd have the power to move the train forward through the snow.

# A Fiery Hell On The Ice



## A FIERY HELL ON THE ICE

**I**T WAS OBVIOUS TO everyone who was waiting, whether they were waiting at the station or somewhere in or around Ashtabula for family and friends, that the LS&SM № 5, the *Pacific Express*, was running well behind schedule. It was also obvious to any of the passengers aboard the *Pacific Express* staring out a window or looking at their watches that the reason for their train being late was the weather, though it was also possible other reasons or a combination of reasons were working together to make the train late. But being confident the weather was the likely reason for the delay didn't make it easier for those waiting at the station.

In addition to the people at the station waiting for the *Pacific Express* were LS&MS employees, including telegraph operators, baggage men, and other workers who had their own reasons for waiting for the passengers to arrive.

It's possible that some of the more experienced LS&MS employees, many of whom had gone through several bad winter storms during their careers, began wondering if the *Pacific Express* was delayed due to something other than just the weather. It's also possible that some of the other people waiting at the station, particularly those who rode the trains frequently, began sharing those same concerns.

Nevertheless, most people at the station believed the delay in arriving in Ashtabula was due to the train having to push and pull its way through the deep snow. Yet, they also had the nagging suspicion the delay might be due to something more

serious, such as mechanical problems with the locomotive, a derailment, or the *Pacific Express* being buried or stuck in so much snow that it was unable to either move forward or backward.



## ● The First Awful Moments ●

**M**eanwhile the train was indeed pushing its way through snow that was falling so fast and blowing so fierce that visibility was less than 50 feet. Its progress was agonizingly slow but it was at least approaching Ashtabula. The *Pacific Express*, with Daniel McGuire as the engineer on the *Socrates*, which was the leading locomotive, finally arrived about 7:30 P.M. at the Ashtabula bridge that was only about 1,000 feet east of the Ashtabula station.

Many things were likely going through McGuire's mind as he slowly moved the *Socrates* across the bridge but at least two concerns were likely at the top of the list:

1. The gale force winds that he'd know would buffet the train as it crossed the open bridge.
2. Getting the train through the two-foot high snow drifts covering the tracks (not to mention the combined weight of the train and the snow on the bridge).

Even with the *Columbia*, which was the trailing locomotive, helping pull the train through the snow, McGuire's experience told him that his lead locomotive would have to provide the extra boost of power needed to pull the train through these high snow drifts and to push against the strong winds. He, therefore, pulled the throttle out in an attempt to increase the speed of the train, which at the time was chugging and puffing along at about 12 to 14 miles an hour.

The 154-foot length of the bridge was just long enough for the *Socrates* and the *Columbia* with their respective tenders and, at most, two of the express cars, to be on the bridge at the same time. (As noted earlier, express cars resembled baggage cars but carried more valuable freight.)

So, when the wheels of the *Socrates* reached the western abutment of the bridge, nine of the eleven cars that made up the train, including all those in which passengers were riding, had yet to reach the eastern end of the bridge.

No one aboard the train, whether crew or passengers, could have imagined that in only a few moments they'd become part of an epic, historic, and absolutely horrifying railroad disaster — a railroad disaster for the ages.



**E**ven though the wind from the winter storm was howling through the ravine and around the bridge, McGuire was still able to hear a loud, sharp, sickening crack at the moment the *Socrates* reached the western abutment of the bridge while most of the cars remained on the tracks east of the bridge. McGuire initially thought the cracking sound might have been an exploding torpedo though he doubted that anyone would've placed a torpedo on the tracks only a few hundred feet from the station.

(Torpedoes, which were called railway detonators in the United Kingdom, were used to warn an approaching train of a unspecified danger ahead on the line. The coin-sized torpedoes exploded with a loud bang as the wheel of a locomotive moved over it. A railroad worker used two straps to secure the torpedo on top of the rail.)

McGuire then felt such a strange sensation that he later could only explain it by thinking the *Socrates* was suddenly "running uphill" even though it was still on the bridge. The reason for the brief, though strange, sensation McGuire felt, unfortunately, became only too obvious when he realized the loud, sharp crack he heard wasn't a torpedo but was, instead, the Ashtabula River bridge buckling, cracking, and splitting apart directly below the *Socrates*.

He realized instinctively it was pointless by that time to put the *Socrates* in reverse so instead he didn't hesitate in opening the throttle valve to give the *Socrates* full steam to drive it forward and hopefully get the train over the bridge that was collapsing behind him. It was his quick thinking that was enough to prevent the *Socrates* and its tender from falling with the collapsing bridge and, furthermore, preventing a derailment when both were put back, more-or-less, onto the track.

Although McGuire coaxed the *Socrates* and its tender to the relative safety of the abutment, the same couldn't be said for the trailing locomotive *Columbia* and the rest of the train. As McGuire was stopping the *Socrates*, the *Columbia* had been pulled forward by the *Socrates* until it struck the abutment where, for one agonizingly brief moment, only the coupling rod prevented the *Columbia* from falling the 80 or so feet onto the wreckage of the collapsed bridge and the frozen Ashtabula River.

As the name suggests, the coupling rod was used to keep a railcar connected, or coupled, with the railcar behind it. In this case, a coupling rod was connected with the trailing locomotive, the *Columbia*. A coupling rod, however, wasn't designed or intended to prevent a car, let alone something as heavy as a trailing locomotive, from falling off a bridge.

The problem was exacerbated because the rear wheels of the tender didn't get back up on the rails. Only a short time passed before the weight and stress became too great for the coupling rod to handle, and when it was no longer able to hold the *Columbia* to the *Socrates*, it snapped in two.

In a night of horrors that was only beginning, McGuire looked to the back of the train and saw the *Columbia* and the first passenger car to which it was coupled, disappear into darkness along with the collapsing bridge. The remaining ten cars, each coupled with the one before it, also dropped about 80 feet down, one after another with a sickening, thunderously loud crash, into the deep snow covering the frozen river.

Gustavus D. (G. D.) Folsom, who was the engineer on the *Columbia* and survived the disaster, later testified before The Legislature of Ohio Joint Committee Investigation (the Joint Committee) about the collapsing bridge and the moment his *Columbia* began its long 80-foot fall onto the frozen river:<sup>1</sup>

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I was on the *Columbia*, the second engine drawing the train. As near as I could judge I was about two-thirds of the way across the bridge. The bridge began gradually to sink and to swing to the south, and then it recoiled and went to the north... It seemed that when the chord on the south side gave way the north chord recoiled and drew the bridge to the north. It was very sudden—the recoil was at the moment. The first sensation I experienced was the track giving away. I was applying the air brake very lightly. My engine struck the west abutment and seemed to be held a moment by the forward engine until the tender of my engine swung down against the side of the abutment. The iron express car shot under my tender while my engine seemed to be held. My engine fell on top of it. When my engine dropped down, striking the bottom, she turned over to the east endwise. The first I observed was both a settling down and a swinging to the south.

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(See the “Investigations, Allegations, And Denials” chapter for additional testimony.)

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## ● The Collapse And Fall ●

**A**lthough the large, heavy iron bridge had obviously fallen, its collapse didn't happen all at one time but instead the bridge seemed to hang in the air for a moment until it began falling in a slow, sinking motion that began at the point where the weight and pressure was the greatest, which was the area directly below the *Socrates* and *Columbia* as well as at the west abutment near where the two locomotives had just passed over.

In an awful sound that reverberated throughout the ravine, the bridge crashed to the north side of the ravine onto the ice and the snow covering the river below. What remained of the once proud bridge now lay silent in a ten-foot high pile of iron rods, braces, and other debris across the ravine.

# The Immediate Aftermath



## THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

**T**HE CITIZENS IN AND around Ashtabula did heroic and remarkable work in the hours and days following such a massive railroad disaster, especially considering the snow, cold temperatures, size, and extent of the unexpected disaster. As noted earlier, the people in Ashtabula fought their way through the deep snow and cold to reach the disaster scene and to offer any help they could. It's likely the death toll would have been much higher if it weren't for the invaluable assistance of these average citizens who worked with limited resources, knowledge, experience, or training in such a hostile, dangerous environment to rescue and care for strangers.



### • Tending To The Survivors •

**F**irst responders usually consider the following to be the most important critical steps when they first arrive at a major emergency:

1. Assess the situation
2. Get everything under control
3. Organize rescue efforts

Unfortunately, no one in the critical moments following the Ashtabula Disaster was either willing or able to take charge in starting any of these steps at the disaster scene. The few men who were among the first to arrive at the disaster scene immediately began to do what they could, but as other men arrived to offer help, they needed direction on what to do and how to do it. Furthermore, some people arrived who were far more interested in checking out the disaster scene than in helping but their curiosity only got in the way of those wanting to help. In other words, there was no one there who could assess the situation, get things under control, and get rescue efforts organized.

In the meantime, a much less honorable group also arrived near the disaster scene: Those interested only in robbing and stealing from the dead and injured passengers or plundering and looting from the disaster scene before escaping into the night. (See the “Villains And Looters Arrive” section later in this chapter.)

Although no one was yet taking complete control, one early, quite logical, decision was to remove the injured from the disaster scene to the engine house located on the riverbank; it was, however, a fairly easy decision to make because it was the only building at the bottom of the ravine. (The engine house, as noted earlier, was used to pump water from the Ashtabula River to the village.)

The engine house was turned into what first responders today might call triage room where the severity of the passengers’ injuries could be determined so the most seriously injured passengers could be handled first. The small, dingy engine house was, however, far from ideal as a triage room, or staging area, considering the seemingly endless number of severely injured passengers being placed on its cold, stone floor. There was, however, no alternative.

As more people from Ashtabula arrived at the disaster scene, and the engine house in particular, they were shocked not only by the sheer number of injured passengers but perhaps even more so by the severity of some of the ghastly injuries. Only a few injured passengers weren’t groaning or screaming from the pain their injuries were causing; even those with much less serious injuries were whimpering in pain while calling out for family members. Regardless of the severity of their injuries, all were suffering from shock that was made worse by the bitter cold and conditions in the engine house. It was unlike anything the people of Ashtabula had ever seen before.

The injured were laid out on the floor but space had quickly become a premium as a steady supply of injured passengers continued arriving at the door of the engine house. It was obvious that something had to be done before available space completely disappeared so a decision was made to move the passengers with less serious injuries, especially those who could walk on their own, from the engine house to another location in Ashtabula.

Therefore, any injured passengers who could climb the steps to reach the top of the ravine were taken out of the engine house and began climbing the steps to the top of the ravine. However, the more seriously injured passengers, for example those unable to walk, would have to be carried or otherwise helped up the steps to the top of the ravine. These steps were rickety, narrow, and snow covered and definitely not meant for anyone helping or carrying seriously injured passengers out of the ravine. Even the strongest men helping the injured passengers were exhausted by the time they reached the last step at the top of the ravine.

However, access to the disaster scene was even more dangerous, dizzying, and precipitous from the other side of the ravine because there was no path, no stairs or steps leading to the top of the ravine. Instead, the only way to the river on this side of the ravine was walking and climbing through brush, deep snow, and down the steep bank.

It took time to get some semblance of organization and to find enough men but eventually a line of men was formed on both sides of the ravine so the injured passengers could be passed from one man up the ravine to the next man, similar to a human chain or bucket brigade. Any passengers too injured to walk, and there were many, were carried by the people/rescuers up both sides of the ravine. It took time along with an impressive amount of strength, determination, until most of the injured passengers were taken away from the dismal engine house to the top of the ravine.

**A**s the injured and uninjured passengers were making their way up the sides of the ravine, the next decision was where to take them once they reached the top of the ravine. Because Ashtabula didn't have anything resembling a hospital at the time of the disaster, the injured were eventually taken to several businesses in Ashtabula. Several injured passengers, for example, were taken to the Eagle Hotel operated by Patrick Mulligan.

Even though the Eagle Hotel may have been called a hotel, the term was used rather loosely and very inaccurately because while it was deplorable and unsavory before the disaster, it became an appalling place during the hours and days following the disaster.

The uncarpeted bedroom floors and hallways in the Eagle Hotel soon became slippery from the melted snow tracked in from the boots and clothing of the people entering and leaving the hotel. The melted snow, however, wasn't the only thing making the floor dangerously slippery that night — the pools of blood dripping from the arriving injured passengers made the floors even more hazardous for everyone walking through the hotel.

The bedrooms in the Eagle Hotel were, to say the least, tiny, and basic with barely enough space for a small bed and washstand. The rooms didn't have any stoves to provide heat, which certainly was needed, and would have been much appreciated by the injured passengers throughout the night of the disaster. Small rooms and little to no heat were only unpleasant compared to the beds, which consisted of straw ticks, being covered with filthy, disgusting sheets. (Straw ticks weren't a type of bedbug but instead were mattresses made from a coarse cotton material, or shoddy, and usually filled with straw.)

The conditions at the Eagle Hotel were anything but antiseptic and becoming less antiseptic as each minute passed. The injured, who were laid two-by-two on the wretched floor, were cold, covered with blood, frightened, and still wearing their tattered clothing that was also covered in blood and body tissue — though not necessarily their own. Most were in shock, and many were near death as they drifted in and out of consciousness.

Despite its appalling conditions, the Eagle Hotel had one critically important advantage in the minutes and hours following the disaster: It was very close to the railroad tracks, the collapsed bridge, and the disaster scene. Therefore, it could serve as a base of operations where the injured passengers, many still bleeding from serious lacerations and other injuries, others with broken bones, some internal injuries, and all in shock, could be quickly taken.

Several groups of people pushed their way through the narrow halls of the Eagle Hotel throughout that long, dreadful night even though they weren't there to offer help, or to even have a kind word of comfort. They instead were there to walk past room after room and silently stare in morbid curiosity at the injured passengers. On top of everything else that happened to them, the injured passengers, who in addition to their injuries, and anything else that might have happened to them, began losing privacy, even their dignity, at the Eagle Hotel. It's not unreasonable to believe that it was this lack of privacy and dignity that led some injured passengers to lose any remaining hope of survival.

Furthermore, even though some surviving passengers were fortunate to be taken to rooms at better locations, or at least better rooms at the Eagle Hotel, some of them were robbed of the money they had in their pockets by the same men who were in reality only pretending to help them to the better rooms. (See the "Villains And Looters Arrive" section later in this chapter for other similar examples.)

**A road of sorts was** finally cleared through the snow to an area near where the bridge once stood. Even though it required a great deal of work and effort for both the men and the horses to complete, it had to be done so sleds could then be taken down the ravine to the disaster scene and the more severely injured

# The Nightmarish Morgue



## THE NIGHTMARISH MORGUE

**A** S SOON AS THE surviving passengers could be removed from the wreckage and taken to relative safer locations, the LS&MS workers could begin their difficult, unpleasant, and gruesome job of removing the blackened, burned bodies, as well as the debris of the train and the bridge.

The phrase “disaster scene” was woefully inadequate in describing the area in which they were to work. The area was a confusing maze and heaps of twisted, sharp pieces of iron, along with broken trucks, and assorted debris of all sizes, shapes, and weights. Iron rails from the collapsed bridge were scattered on the ice. The maze also included heavy pieces of what had been the *Columbia* locomotive and broken tops of the smashed rail cars.

It wasn't only working in the dangerous conditions of the wreckage and debris because this type of recovery work in the 1870s would be difficult on solid, dry ground in the summer months, but this was late January in northern Ohio following a series of blizzards and frigid temperatures.

Furthermore, most of the recovery work in this disaster would be done on the slippery uneven ice of the frozen Ashtabula River.

To make it safer, if not easier, for the LS&MS workers to do what needed to be done on the frozen river, the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern used one of its trains to bring in several long wooden planks for the workers to put on the ice in an

attempt to decrease the chances of slipping and falling. It wasn't a perfect solution but it did help and allowed the workers to perform their work more efficiently as they began carrying away heavy, bulky pieces of the wreckage.

This, of course, wouldn't be typical recovery work of carrying away pieces of wreckage following a train accident. It was also, on many levels, often a thankless job but at the same time it was physically and mentally difficult, at times tedious, and always dangerous. Death seemed to be everywhere and definitely had an affect on each man working the disaster scene. Although they were railroad men, and specifically LS&MS employees, they weren't trained recovery workers as we'd have working such a disaster today.

Although most of the Ashtabula River was frozen, several areas of open water remained that wasn't only obviously cold but might have been up to four feet deep. The LS&MS workers wore high rubber boots and waterproof coats when they worked in the ice, snow, and especially in the water. Even the slightest breeze combined with the ice, snow, and especially the cold water to make the work even more miserable and difficult.

The debris in the piles of wreckage was heavy and cumbersome; the iron was bent, tangled, and twisted together. Much of the debris in the wreck was, furthermore, stuck and wedged tightly in the cold Ashtabula River. The workers had to be careful not to get cut on the sharp pieces of metal and broken glass that seemed to be everywhere.

**I**n addition to the Ashtabula mayor, who'd made several appearances at the disaster scene, other LS&MS officials at the accident scene assisting in the work included the superintendent of bridges and the train dispatcher. Charles Collins, who was the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern official responsible for maintaining the railroad tracks in and around Ashtabula, was seen weeping uncontrollably as he walked through the disaster scene. He perhaps felt that visiting the disaster scene was the best way of dealing with the grief, guilt, and sympathy he felt for the passengers — not only those who died but also those who survived. (See the "The Disaster Claims Two More Lives" chapter for information on what ultimately happened to Collins.)

Although the Ashtabula mayor was at the disaster scene, he wasn't involved, either directly or indirectly, nor apparently even being consulted, about decisions concerning the recovery efforts the LS&MS had planned. Indeed, the responsibility wasn't even given to, or assumed by, any official, elected, medical or otherwise, from Ashtabula, but instead was the responsibility of an official of the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern.



As the LS&MS workers began removing some of the debris it wasn't unusual, especially as they began their work, to find bodies packed, virtually jammed, inside and under the debris as if the bodies and the debris had become one piece. Other bodies were found buried in the snow or ice under parts of the wreckage. These bodies were often frozen solid to various pieces of the wreckage yet had to be dislodged, removed, and taken from the wreckage.

The workers would also have to remove other bodies, many of which were mutilated, disfigured, and blackened by the intense flames. And that didn't take into account the overwhelming smell of the burnt flesh.

In addition to the planks and other equipment needed by the LS&MS workers at the disaster scene, the LS&MS also arranged a much more somber delivery: The delivery included several boxes in which the LS&MS workers were to place the dead bodies and various body parts.

Some of those working at the disaster scene may have been surprised by the sheer number of boxes that had arrived but other workers may not have even noticed considering what they'd already seen that evening. The bodies of men and women and, perhaps most difficult all, the children, were removed from the piles of wreckage and placed in the boxes with as much respect and dignity as possible by the LS&MS workers.

Because only authorized people, in other words LS&MS workers, were allowed at the disaster scene, relatives and friends of the dead passengers were forbidden to be near the wreckage and, therefore, not able to help carry the boxes containing the bodies that might be their family members. Only a few relatives and friends managed to be at the top of the ravine to view the recovery work for themselves.

In another in a series of questionable decisions, other relatives and friends who wanted to get to Ashtabula weren't even allowed to board trains bound to Ashtabula and were instead detained at the stations in other cities. On the other hand, it may have been better for them not to arrive in Ashtabula until the dead passengers were taken away from the disaster scene. It would have been cruel on many levels if the families witnessed the LS&MS workers discovering and removing the bruised, broken, blackened forms that no longer appeared human.

It was a different story, however, for other people who were allowed to stand on top of the ravine and watch, in macabre curiosity, the work being done far below them on the frozen river. But even some of them had to be shocked and stunned by the time the last blackened form had been removed from the wreckage.

The people on top of the ravine, however, were watching the work of removing the blackened forms from a distance. It would, however, be a different story for many people when the blackened forms were seen "upclose and personal" after they were taken to the nightmarish morgue.

## ● The Freight House Becomes A Nightmarish Morgue

**A**fter the blackened forms of the dead passengers were removed from the disaster scene, they were initially placed on horse-drawn sleds and taken to the LS&MS Railroad freight house in Ashtabula.

Even the most talented author of horror novels, such as Edgar Allan Poe, might not be able to come up with a better scene for a macabre story. The freight house wasn't meant for anything but its intended purpose as a building for the railroad to store freight. It, therefore, wasn't a cheery place even on the most pleasant summer days, but in mid-winter, it was a cold, drab, and gloomy place that was made even more so when its doors were closed and the cold, quiet, darkness of the winter day settled into it. It seemed to be an appropriate building to serve as a temporary morgue for this horrible night in Ashtabula.

Very little time seemed to pass before the floor of the freight house was covered almost wall-to-wall with the ghastly sight of 36 bodies that were arranged, in open boxes, in a double line of rows along the sides.

Most relatives and friends, fortunately, weren't allowed near the freight house. It was, as it was at the disaster scene, probably just as well to keep the relatives and friends away to spare them viewing the awful, stomach-churning sight of the freight house turned dreadful temporary morgue.

The LS&MS workers in the freight house may have been too busy placing the lifeless, blackened bodies on the floor to notice but soon everyone in the freight house couldn't help but realize how awful their death had been. The bodies were laid out on the floor with distorted arms and legs, hands uplifted to nowhere in particular, with averted faces, and with all the agonized and awful shapes that death by fire produced.

Not all the bodies in the freight house/temporary morgue were burned and blackened lifeless forms. Although these passengers died as a result of the flames, they likely died from a combination of factors such as heat, smoke inhalation, or some other breathing problems caused from the incessant flames sucking out all the air. Although the bodies didn't show much, if any, signs of physical injury, their deaths were unlikely to be either quick, easy, or merciful.

- Some passengers may have been standing up, fully knowing death was approaching, with outstretched arms reaching high, perhaps in prayers to God for help or in pleas for help from other passengers.
- A body at the freight house was in a fetal position with its arms and legs

# The Passengers Lost



## THE PASSENGERS LOST

**V**ERY FEW MAN-MADE DISASTERS or accidents, or even natural disasters, have ever reached so far, or brought so much sadness and emotions to so many areas in the United States before or even after December 29, 1876. Simply put, never before was there such nationwide mourning for any deadly tragedy (We're not including war or terrorist attacks such as September 11).

Perhaps one exception would be the news surrounding the sinking of the RMS *Titanic* that occurred several years after the Ashtabula Disaster. In both cases, people across the United States couldn't wait until they got a hold of a newspaper so they could continue following every tidbit of news about the disaster. The Ashtabula Disaster was unprecedented in U.S. history, and it still remains one of the greatest railroad disasters, and indeed transportation tragedies, in U.S. history.

The following list shows that the passengers who perished in the Ashtabula Disaster called many locations home:

- Ohio (25 passengers)
- New York (23 passengers)
- Illinois (9 passengers)
- Massachusetts (7 passengers)
- Maine (5 passengers)

- Nebraska (2 passengers)
- Canada (2 passengers)

It, therefore, wasn't just a disaster in Ashtabula but in a real sense, was, indeed, close to being a national calamity at the time. (See the upcoming "Passenger Fatalities" section for more information.)

It's unfortunate that more information isn't available about most of these passengers. Most were likely enjoying the holiday week by visiting with family and friends. Some were clergymen, others businessmen, some were farmers. Some, sadly, were just children and had yet to begin fully enjoying their lives.

Most of the crew and passengers who died in the disaster were likely little known outside their communities or places of business. However, among the 92 passengers and crew members killed in the Ashtabula Disaster was a young couple whose bodies were never found or positively identified: Philip Paul Bliss and his wife, Lucy.

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## • Philip Paul Bliss •

**T**he following is a short biography of Philip Paul Bliss, which is included in *The 1876 Ashtabula Disaster* because he was the most well-known of all those who perished in the Ashtabula Disaster. His death and the death of his wife, Lucy, was one of the more tragic events in a night of tragic events connected with the Ashtabula Disaster.

Although Philip Paul Bliss (1838-1876) was known as a bass-baritone Gospel singer and conductor, he's probably better known as a composer and writer of hymns. Even today you'll likely find his name in the hymn books at your local church or chapel. Some of his best known include *Almost Persuaded*, *Hallelujah*, *What a Saviour!*, *Let the Lower Lights Be Burning*, *Wonderful Words of Life*, and the music for Horatio Spafford's *It Is Well with My Soul*.

# The Disaster Claims Two More Lives



## THE DISASTER CLAIMS TWO MORE LIVES

**A**LTHOUGH THERE WAS, AND still is, some question as to his culpability in the disaster, Charles Collins was noticeably depressed and physically upset over the disaster and, at least privately, felt partially responsible for it.

He tried to resign his position at the LS&MS soon after he testified before the Ohio Legislature commission but the LS&MS Board of Directors refused his resignation. It's possible the LS&MS refusing to accept his resignation added to Collins' depression and guilt he felt following the disaster .

The depression, guilt, and emotional breakdown Collins felt apparently became too overwhelming for him to handle. His body was found in the bedroom of his Cleveland home with a gunshot to the head. Authorities found a handgun next to his body. His death occurred just two days after he testified before the Ohio Legislature commission investigating the disaster.

Even though his friends noted Collins' depression and guilt following the disaster, there's always been some question over the initial circumstantial evidence suggesting Collins committed suicide. His death was initially ruled a suicide, but a police report at the time also suggested the gunshot wound may not have been self-inflicted.

Therefore, some efforts were made later to determine whether Collins did commit suicide or was killed in some kind of accident or perhaps murdered to cover up and hide what he knew about the safety of the bridge.

His skull was sent two years after his death to Dr. Stephen Smith, who was a medical expert in New York. After a “careful analysis” of Collin’s skull and based on other information, led Dr. Smith to conclude that “Mr. Collins came to his death by a shot wound inflicted by other hands than his own.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, in his opinion, it was quite possible that Collins was murdered.

Furthermore, documents discovered in 2001 also have led many to believe he had indeed been murdered. If so, his killer was never found, though many ideas have been proposed over the years.

Collins, perhaps ironically, was also buried in the Chestnut Grove Cemetery, several feet from the mass grave, and his spirit is believed to haunt the cemetery.

**C**harles Collins’ funeral service was held in Ashtabula on Wednesday, January 21, 1877, and perhaps because of the doubt over the cause of his death, it created a great deal of interest in the area.

In its January 22 edition, the day after the funeral, the *Cleveland Herald* published the following article about Collins’ funeral service:<sup>2</sup>

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“It was the last tribute of respect that could be paid by the citizens of the place to a man who, while not a permanent resident, was one among the most respected and loved. He held a prominent place in the hearts of the people as an exemplary man and faithful friend, and their attendance upon the services yesterday was the last act of respect to his mortal remains. Besides the citizens of Ashtabula present, there were many of the leading railroad men of this city, who had known and respected Mr. Collins during the many years they had been his friends and business associates.

“Rev. Mr. McGiffert made a few remarks upon the life and character of the deceased. He said that the assembly of people had been called together to pay the last tribute to a man known for honesty, uprightness and truthfulness in all things. He was known in all his dealings for that strict probity of character, that conscientiousness which go so far toward making up the perfect man. He had also the gentle qualities of love and affection for those near and dear to him. The last time he parted from his wife, a few days before his death, not knowing, however, that they were never to meet again, he said to her that he wanted her to remember during their separation, how well he loved her. He was thoughtful always for the welfare of his business associates, and to the young men under him he was a father, a kind friend and firm supporter. In the midst of his many business and worldly cares he did not lose sight of his church relations, and the fruits of his life in this regard are left to testify for him. The spiritual benefit of his employees was not lost sight of while other cares were pressing upon him. After land at Collinwood

had been set apart for the erection of a chapel for railroad men, he subscribed first \$150, then \$350, and when there seemed to be some trouble in raising the necessary amount, he said that the chapel should be built in the spring, any way.

“At the request of the family, Mr. J. H. Devereux, representing the railroad acquaintances of Mr. Collins, then made a few remarks. He said that ever since the accident at the bridge, there had been passing through his mind the idea of falling waters, and the song of Moses and the lamb came to him most vividly. In some manner the character of Moses and that of the dead engineer had assimilated themselves together in his mind. Moses was the type of a perfect engineer. He ran the line of the Israelites through the wilderness to a land of security. He had those characteristics of a noble, true man, which made him great, and in just these particulars did Mr. Collins excel, and they made him the leading engineer of this broad land. The speaker referred to the veneration of the deceased, and referred to the fact that he always rested on the Sabbath day, and that his office was always closed on that day, and that he often went to the house of God. Mr. Devereux attempted to say a few words to the friends, but found himself too much moved to speak further, and closed with a few words of prayer.”

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Despite the findings of The Legislature of Ohio Joint Committee Investigation and the Coroner’s Jury, and other allegations — most of which were unfounded or unsubstantiated — about his blame and liability in the disaster, Collins’ reputation remained virtually intact as was the respect people had for him. This was evident at the memorial service that was held in Cleveland, when the Reverend Dr. Hayden, who was Collins’ pastor, said the following of him: <sup>3</sup>

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“Mr. Collins had a praying mother, and when one owes so much to a praying mother as I do, he will not fail to make important mention of this fact. In 1849 he came to Ohio and began the work of laying out the Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati and Indianapolis railroad. Here, amidst the hardships of pioneer life, there were many temptations to desecrate the Sabbath, yet during all this time the young man remembered the influence of the good mother, and manifested a high moral sentiment throughout. His life work on the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern railroad was begun in 1851, and from that time till the moment of his sudden death, his constant attention was given to this great thoroughfare, and his death itself was a sacrifice to it. The busy engineer always had time to look after the betterment of his employees, and there is to-day many a family living upon its own lot, through his beneficence.”

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The respect for Collins was also mentioned in other newspapers in Ohio. For example, the *Ashtabula Telegraph* printed the following article about Collins shortly after his death with “Another Victim of the Bridge Disaster” as the headline:

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“Our community received another shock on Saturday last, hardly less severe than that of the news of the disaster itself. The announcement that Charles Collins, the Chief Engineer of the L. S. & M. S. road was dead, without any cause but that he was found lifeless in his bed, carried every one back in mind to the bridge calamity, and there was an intense eagerness for an explanation. The evening papers brought that explanation,

but with it an increased effect upon the sensibilities of our citizens. He was, to be sure, found dead in his bed, but beside him were the implements telling the manner of death. He died by his own hand. The story of his death we abstract and condense from the Cleveland dailies, as follows: Mr. Collins' assistant—Mr. I. C. Brewer, of the Toledo division, sought his presence at his office on Water street, on Saturday morning, but not finding him or hearing of him, passed over to his residence, and being informed by the colored man in charge that he was not there, determined to make an examination of the house for the settlement of the question—whether he was in the house. Upon passing through the house everything indicated order and quiet, but loneliness, until the bedroom was reached. Here he found the person of his search, dead, and in the first stages of decomposition, marked with blood, a revolver at hand, with which the deed was done, and the handle of another just showed from his pillow. The determined purpose that controlled him was shown by the means for making his destruction sure. A razor was also found upon the bed. It was found that the muzzle of the revolver had been placed in his mouth, and the direction of the ball was upward through the roof of the mouth, and out through the upper and back part of his head. The first shot seems to be the fatal and only one.

"In casting about for a cause for this violent and shocking death, circumstances point to the effect upon his mind of the bridge accident at this place. We find that he laid it deeply to heart, and when he first beheld the scene, he wept over it in an outburst of grief. That effect he seems not to have been able to shake off. It followed him night and day, leaving no taste for food, and driving sleep from his pillow, until he was led to say to some of his more intimate friends, that he believed it would drive him crazy. His was a gentle, sensitive nature, and his profession carried to its utmost perfection and success, which was shown in the superior condition of the road, and all its appointments were his chief pride. This pride, we apprehend, never extended to this bridge, as his rather guarded observations in reference to it, from the beginning, sufficiently indicate. In the minds of many of the best informed in this community, he rather shrank from the responsibility of it. The special care of it, therefore, seems to have been in a great measure, at least, committed to other hands. Whatever his feelings, however, he could not in his position escape responsibility. The sense of that responsibility seems to have had a striking effect upon him in the recent examinations by the Legislative Committee, and conferences in which he was present on Wednesday afternoon and evening—the night, probably, upon which the fatal act was committed. His state of mind was not unobserved by some of his intimate companions. We are told that Mr. Brewer, his trusted assistant, had, at his earnest solicitation, consented to remain with him during Monday and Tuesday nights, and was surprised at the alarming state into which his mind had fallen.

"It was further shown by the act, and the manner of it. He had tendered his resignation to the Board of Directors, on the Monday before, when with tears he said, 'I have worked for thirty years, with what fidelity God knows, for the protection and safety of the public, and now the public, forgetting all these years of service, has turned against me.'

"The resignation was, of course, not accepted, and he was assured that his view was entirely unjust and unworthy, but all to no effect. The thought of possible injustice still haunted him.

"On Wednesday night Mr. Brewer intended to go, as he had done the two previous nights, and stay with him at his residence on St. Clair street. But, upon calling at the office and being assured that he had left no word for him either in regard to the evening or concerning the trip of inspection contemplated for Thursday, he concluded that the



# Historical Accounts



## HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

**A**S MENTIONED IN THE beginning of the book (“Overview”) the Ashtabula Disaster was so horrible, not just in its size, impact, number killed, and rumors and accusations that the news of the disaster appeared in many newspapers across the country and even shared the headlines, articles, and stories with the big national news stories at the time.

This chapter includes a few examples of the articles from newspapers across the United States.



## ● The *Chicago Tribune* (December 30, 1876) ●

**T**he following historical account is from the December 30, 1876, edition of the *Chicago Tribune*.

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The proportions of the Ashtabula horror are now approximately known. Daylight, which gave an opportunity to find and enumerate the saved, reveals the fact that two out of every three passengers on the fated train are lost. Of the 160 passengers who the maimed conductor reports as having been on board, but fifty-nine can be found or accounted for. The remaining 100, burned to ashes or shapeless lumps of charred flesh, lie under the ruins of the bridge and train.

The disaster was dramatically complete. No element of horror was wanting. First, the crash of the bridge, the agonizing moments of suspense as the seven laden cars plunged down their fearful leap to the icy river-bed; then the fire, which came to devour all that had been left alive by the crash; then the water, which gurgled up from under the broken ice and offered another form of death, and, finally, the biting blast filled with snow, which froze and benumbed those who had escaped water and fire. It was an ideal tragedy.

The scene of the accident was the valley of the creek which, flowing down past the eastern margin of Ashtabula village, passes under the railway three or four hundred yards east of the station. Here for many years after the Lake Shore road was built, there was a long wooden trestle-work, but as the road was improved, this was superseded about ten years ago with an iron Howe truss, built at the Cleveland shops, and resting at either end upon high stone piers, flanked by heavy earthen embankments. The iron structure was a single span of 159 feet, crossed by a double track seventy feet above the water, which at that point is now from three to six feet deep, and covered with eight inches of ice. The descent into the valley on either side is precipitous, and, as the hills and slopes are piled with heavy drifts of snow, there was no little difficulty in reaching the wreck after the disaster became known.

The disaster occurred shortly before eight o'clock. It was the wildest winter night of the year. Three hours behind its time, the Pacific Express, which had left New York the night before, struggled along through the drifts and the blinding storm. The eleven cars were a heavy burden to the two engines, and when the leading locomotive broke through the drifts beyond the ravine, and rolled on across the bridge, the train was moving at less than ten miles an hour. The head lamp threw but a short and dim flash of light in the front, so thick was the air with the driving snow. The train crept across the bridge, the leading engine had reached solid ground beyond, and its driver had just given it steam, when something in the undergearing of the bridge snapped.

For an instant, there was a confused crackling of beams and girders, ending with a tremendous crash, as the whole train but the leading engine broke through the framework, and fell in a heap of crushed and splintered ruins at the bottom. Notwithstanding the wind and storm, the crash was heard by people within-doors half a mile away. For a moment there was silence, a stunned sensation among the survivors, who in all stages of mutilation lay piled among the dying and dead. Then arose the cries of the maimed and suffering; the few who remained unhurt hastened to escape from the shattered

cars. They crawled out of windows into freezing water waist-deep. Men, women and children, with limbs bruised and broken, pinched between timbers and transfixed by jagged splinters, begged with their last breath for aid that no human power could give.

Five minutes after the train fell, the fire broke out in the cars piled against the abutments at either end. A moment later, flames broke from the smoking-car and first coach piled across each other near the middle of the stream. In less than ten minutes after the catastrophe, every car in the wreck was on fire, and the flames, fed by the dry varnished work and fanned by the icy gale, licked up the ruins as though they had been tinder. Destruction was so swift that mercy was baffled. Men who, in the bewilderment of the shock, sprang out and reached to solid ice, went back after wives and children and found them suffocating and roasting in the flames.

The neighboring residents, startled by the crash, were lighted to the scene by the conflagration, which made even their prompt assistance too late. By midnight, the cremation was complete. The storm had subsided, but the wind still blew fiercely, and the cold was more intense. When morning came, all that remained of the Pacific Express was a row of car wheels, axles, brake-irons, truck-frames and twisted rails lying in a black pool at the bottom of the gorge. The wood had burned completely away, and the ruins were covered with white ashes. Here and there a mass of charred, smoldering substance sent up a little cloud of sickening vapor, which told that it was human flesh slowly yielding to the corrosion of the fires. On the crest of the western abutment, half buried in the snow, stood the rescued locomotive, all that remained of the fated train. As the bridge fell, its driver had given it a quick head of steam, which tore the draw head from its tender, and the liberated engine shot forward and buried itself in the snow. The other locomotive, drawn backward by the falling train, tumbled over the pier and fell bottom upward on the express car next behind. The engineer, Folsom, escaped with a broken leg; how, he cannot tell, nor can anyone else imagine.

There is no death-list to report. There can be none until the list of the missing ones who traveled by the Lake Shore Road on Friday is made up. There are no remains that can ever be identified. The three charred, shapeless lumps recovered up to noon to-day are beyond all hope of recognition. Old or young, male or female, black or white, no man can tell. They are alike in the crucible of death. For the rest, there are piles of white ashes in which glisten the crumbling particles of calcined bones; in other places masses of black, charred debris, half under water, which may contain fragments of bodies, but nothing of human semblance. It is thought that there may be a few corpses under the ice, as there were women and children who sprang into the water and sank, but none have been thus far recovered.

# Conclusion



## CONCLUSION

**M**ANY PEOPLE WHO WERE familiar with the Ashtabula Disaster, and the bridge in particular, at the time of the disaster weren't necessarily surprised that the Ashtabula Bridge collapsed but may have been more surprised that the bridge remained functional for eleven years without failing or even having a minor mishap. In other words, they were surprised the bridge didn't collapse earlier.

The bridge was inspected at least four times each year by officials from the LS&MS and the only problem they reported was a peculiar "snapping" noise that locomotive engineers reported occasionally heard as their trains crossed over the bridge. This may have been the same snapping noise that Daniel McGuire heard immediately before the bridge collapsed. The bridge may have been inspected several times a year, but apparently in each case, the LS&MS inspectors somehow missed the fact that the metal on the ends of the beams had been poorly, crudely, and in an almost amateurish fashion, filed down to make them fit.

Charles Collins was one of the LS&MS officials who inspected the bridge, and even though he inspected the bridge only ten days before the disaster, he apparently didn't find any problems with it. If he had, however, looked more closely at the I-beams, he'd have found more than enough evidence to declare the bridge to be unsafe and immediately close it to all rail traffic. He would have seen what many others later spotted several weeks after the bridge collapsed and the pieces were on the ground: Several of the I-beams were as much as three inches out of alignment at their juncture with the bearing blocks.

This type of bridge depended on all the parts being properly connected, the displacement of the I-beams meant that it was just a matter of time before something horrible occurred. Otherwise, the displacement of the I-beams meant that it was just a matter of time before something horrible could happen.

Amasa B. Stone, Jr., steadfastly, consistently, and fervently maintained until he died that he wasn't to be blamed for the Ashtabula Disaster. He was, nevertheless, wrong about the bridge being built so sturdy and solid as he maintained. However, as we know all so well today, finding the absolute truth in major investigations is often complex, difficult, incomplete, and frustrating.

**B**ecause it's been more than 140 years since the Ashtabula Disaster occurred, it's probably not too surprising that very little can be seen today where the horrifying fire and other terrible events took place on the evening of December 29, 1876. The Ashtabula River now flows beneath an ordinary viaduct, which means it might take a bit of effort to imagine the horror, fear, and death that took place there.

One thing that seems to have remained consistent, perhaps even going back to shortly after the January 1988 memorial services and burials, are sightings of the ghosts and spirits of the passengers who died in the disaster. The ghosts of the passengers, for example, are thought to linger at the Chestnut Grove Cemetery, where the remains of the passengers who burned in the fires were laid to rest, although some times the ghosts have been seen at the disaster scene.

People visiting the Chestnut Grove Cemetery even recently have reported seeing ghosts, spirits, and specters walking near the stark, granite obelisk that marks the common grave at the cemetery. It also hasn't been uncommon for some visitors to the cemetery to hear agonizing screams in the darkness, particularly during the evenings of the anniversary of the disaster; some people even claim they've noticed an unusual odor reminiscent of burned meat.

The ghostlike characters and images are often seen wearing period warm weather clothing as they wander around carrying carpetbags and baskets.

The ornate and Gothic mausoleum of Charles Collins is just a short distance away from the mass grave in the Chestnut Grove Cemetery. It's perhaps ironic that Collins, who as the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern inspector may have missed the fatal flaws in the Ashtabula bridge, would be buried so near those in the mass grave.

The spectral figure of a man has often been seen near Collins' tomb and according to the stories often appears with his face in his hands, weeping bitterly, and in eternal torture, cries "I'm sorry -- I'm so very sorry."

# Appendix



## APPENDIX

**T**HE APPENDIX HAS INFORMATION on accidents, collisions, and disasters that occurred on railroads prior to the Ashtabula Disaster. Even though this is far from being an exhaustive list, you'll see that deadly railroad accidents weren't uncommon before December 29, 1876.



### • Before 1876 — More Trains, More Accidents •

**T**he history of railroads is truly remarkable and one that is full of impressive successes, beginning with the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in England (1830) and the Transcontinental Railroad (1869) in the United States. Railroads helped make many men fabulously wealthy, but it's also a history of remarkable failures that took a huge financial and personal toll from workers, managers, investors, and others.

Although railroads, and the idea of railroads, go back hundreds of years, the idea of railroads being powered by steam locomotives was a revolutionary new technology in the early 1800s. It wasn't only products but also passengers that were moving faster than ever between distant areas. People no longer thought of their neighborhood or village as the "world" and that there was indeed something beyond the river or the mountain.

This was the time of the Industrial Revolution, and railroads were an integral part of that revolution in Europe but arguably even more so in the United States where the rise of the steel, oil, coal, and the shipping businesses helped build the railroads — and vice versa — in the United States.

But that growth in the railroad system during the mid-1800s also came at a cost, particularly concerning safety, and too often, common sense. The poorly designed steam boilers on the locomotives could explode at any time sending metal fragments and scalding steam and hot water through the air.

It wasn't only the locomotives and trains that presented safety concerns. The brittle iron rails weren't always able to support the larger, heavier locomotives and longer trains as well as the increased amount of traffic. The same concerns also applied to the iron bridges that weren't designed to handle these heavier locomotives and longer trains

The first train accident resulting in multiple deaths is believed to have occurred on July 15, 1815, in Philadelphia, County Durham, in the United Kingdom. Dozens of curious spectators were enjoying an up close look at the experimental locomotive *Mechanical Traveller*, also known as the *Steam Horse*, when its wrought iron boiler exploded without warning. The explosion sent streams of hot steam, boiling water, and broken pieces of shrapnel-like iron into the panicked crowd. This early railway disaster resulted in the deaths of up to 16 people, with about 40 more people being hurt, many with serious burns.

Signal failures and human errors led to head-on crashes between two locomotives (also known as "cornfield meets"). Poorly designed and built passenger cars derailed, often with tragic results as fragile wooden coaches splintered on impact, and the debris was often ignited from the kerosene lamps that provided light or the coal stoves that provided heat for the passengers in winter. The September 10, 1874, Thorpe Rail Accident in England, was one such example. It resulted in the deaths of 25 passengers and crew (a telegraph clerk's error was to blame).

**T**he following lists several notable accidents that occurred in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada prior to the Ashtabula Disaster. The list certainly isn't exhaustive but nevertheless will give you an idea of how many serious, often deadly, railroad accidents occurred in the 1800s.

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# For More Information

## The 1917 Ciurea Rail Disaster

You probably haven't heard about the Ciurea rail disaster, not only because it occurred more than 100 years ago (January 13, 1917) but also because of its location and the tight censorship of the Romanian and Russian authorities.

The final death toll of this rail disaster may exceeded 1,000 although wartime secrecy, plus the remoteness of the area in which the accident occurred, meant that no precise figure has yet to be determined.

This free PDF book is the story of the Ciurea rail disaster, which involved a very overloaded troop train that ran out of control, leading to a fire that killed many of its victims, was by far one of the worst, if not the worst, railroad accident ever to occur anywhere in Europe.

Please visit my Reading Room at [www.scottslaughter.com](http://www.scottslaughter.com) (or [click here](#) for more information if you're reading the digital version of *The 1876 Ashtabula Disaster*.)