

April 2, 1912.

IN RE INVESTIGATION OF ACCIDENT ON THE NORFOLK  
& WESTERN RAILWAY, AT DRY BRANCH, VA.,  
February 9, 1912.

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On February 9, 1912, there was a rear-end collision on the Norfolk & Western Railway, at Dry Branch, Va., between a freight train and a passenger train, resulting in the death of three employes and the injury of two employes and a postal clerk.

This accident was reported by telegraph by the Norfolk & Western Railway Company on February 9, and after investigation, the Chief Inspector of Safety Appliances reports as follows:

The primary cause of this accident was the mistake of a telegraph operator in permitting the passenger train to enter a block under a clear signal when the block was occupied by another train. A contributing cause was the failure of the conductor and flagman of the freight train to protect their train while it was occupying the main track on the time of a superior train.

That portion of the Norfolk & Western Railway between Pepper and Pearisburg, Va., on which this accident occurred, is alternately single-track and double-track road, and is equipped with normal danger manual block signals. In this territory the rules of the company require an absolute block to be maintained in any movement involving a passenger train. Permissive blocking for freight trains is allowed, except between Pepper and Belspring.

About one mile east of the block signal station at Dry Branch there is a seven-degree curve, known as "White Rock Curve". Between this curve and the station there is a four-degree curve in the opposite direction, approximately 2,300 feet long, extending to the point where the accident occurred. There is also a slight descending grade toward the west.

West-bound extra freight train No. 482, consisting of two engines, 55 empty cars and two cabooses, left Roanoke, Va., for Bluefield, W. Va., at 2:00 a. m., February 9, with Conductor Fink in charge, and at 6:22 a. m. arrived at Dry Branch, Va., 49.8 miles from Roanoke, where it was to take the siding to allow west-bound passenger train No. 15 to pass. An east-bound extra freight train, however, was taking water at Dry Branch, blocking the crossover so that extra No. 482 could not go in on the siding. While waiting for this train to get clear of the crossover, extra No. 482 was struck by west-bound passenger train No. 15, at 6:34 a. m.

Passenger train No. 15 left Roanoke on the morning of the accident at 4:47, 27 minutes late. It consisted of an engine, a postal car, a baggage car, two coaches, one cafe car and one sleeping car, with Conductor Martin and Engineman Ranson in charge. As this train approached Belspring, the engineman sounded the whistle for the block signal. Operator Harmon who was stationed

at Belspring, was copying messages for an east-bound train; forgetting for the time being that the block was already occupied by extra No. 482, he displayed a clear signal, and train No. 15 passed Belspring at 6:29 a. m., 31 minutes late. Operator Harmon discovered his mistake just as the passenger train passed his station. He called the operator at Dry Branch by telephone telling him to inform the crew of extra No. 482 that No. 15 was coming, and have them protect their train against it. The operator at Dry Branch notified Engineman Miller of extra No. 482, who at once sounded the whistle signal for the flagman to go back to protect the train. Flagman Medley had already started back but had gone only a short distance; when he heard the engineman's signal, he started to run and had reached a point about 800 feet from the rear of his train, about two car lengths east of Dry Branch Bridge, when train No. 15 passed him.

Engineman Ranson of train No. 15 stated that when within about 15 car lengths of Dry Branch Bridge he saw flagman Medley. He sounded the whistle in answer to the flagman's signal and made a heavy service application of the brakes; he was in the act of making a second application of the brakes when he passed the flagman, ran over a torpedo, and saw the caboose of extra No. 482 about 12 car lengths ahead. He immediately applied the air brakes in emergency, and jumped from his engine just before the collision.

Train No. 15 had been running at about 35 miles an hour; at the time of the collision its speed had been reduced to about 10 miles an hour. The weather was clear.

The force of the collision raised the rear caboose on to the pilot of the passenger train engine and crushed the second caboose, killing the occupants, a conductor and two brakemen who were deadheading to Bluefield. Slight injuries were sustained by the engineman, fireman and postal clerk on train No. 15. The wreckage caught fire and the bodies of the men who had been killed were nearly incinerated before being recovered. Other than the demolition of the two cabooses, the trains involved in this collision suffered little damage. After the collision, Engineman Ranson tried to back train No. 15 away from the wreckage of the two cabooses, but he was unable to do so until they were nearly consumed by fire.

Conductor Fink stated that when his train stopped at Dry Branch he told the flagman that he had better go back, as they were encroaching on the time of train No. 15. However, it appears to have been some time before the flagman started back; Conductor Fink stated that the engineman did not sound the whistle signal for the flagman to go back until three or four minutes after the train had come to a stop.

Flagman Medley stated that he did not hear the conductor say anything about flagging. He was walking back to protect the train when he heard the engineman's signal,

and he at once started to run. When he reached the west end of the bridge he placed one torpedo on the track. He then crossed the bridge; just afterwards train No. 15 passed him. He admitted that if he had gone back as soon as his train came to a stop he would have been able to flag train No. 15 in time to prevent the collision. Train No. 482 came to a stop at 6:22 a. m., and the collision did not occur until 6:34 a. m., so that Flagman Medley had 12 minutes in which to properly protect his train. But knowing that the rules of the company did not permit a passenger train to follow a freight train into an occupied block, he had no reason to expect that train No. 15 was approaching. Furthermore, a timetable rule gives extra trains the right, "to stand within station limits, yard limits, coaling and water stations, without protecting against third and fourth class trains", except during foggy weather. This rule appears to make flagging within station or yard limits and at coaling and water stations a measure of precaution to be taken only under unusual conditions, except as to first-class trains. Any modification of the flagging rule which tends to limit its application is likely to lead to lax methods, such as were exhibited in this case, and must be regarded as undesirable.

Operator Harmon had been stationed at Beltspring several different times; at this time he had been there only seven days prior to the accident. He learned telegraphy on this road. He was between 22 and 23 years of age and

had had nine months' experience as an operator. He had been on duty 6 hours and 34 minutes, after a period of 16 hours off duty. Flagman Hedley, who had had about 2½ years' experience, was the head brakeman, but had changed off with the regular flagman at a station ten miles east of Dry Branch for the purpose of getting his breakfast in the caboose. He had been on duty 5 hours and 4 minutes after a period of 60 hours off duty. Conductor Fink had had over ten years' experience. He had been on duty 5 hours and 4 minutes after a period of 17 hours and 15 minutes off duty.