

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 52 – June 2019

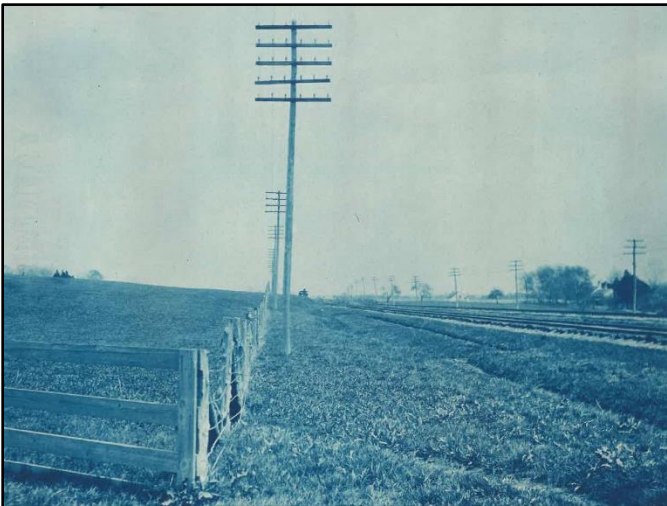
Railroad Disasters

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



The Historic Records Center has recently reorganized the records that form our Railroad Collection. The most striking documents are those that deal with injuries and fatalities resulting from accidents on railroad tracks throughout Fairfax. These accidents involved railway workers and members of the general public. This month's *Found in the Archives* examines these events.

Following the invention and popularization of steam locomotive trains in Great Britain in the early decades of the 19th century, the United States readily took to this efficient mode of mass transportation. Many railroad companies were initially formed to provide freight carriage, locomotives being much faster and cheaper than the traditional transportation methods of canal barge, stagecoach and wagon. In the mid-19th century, railroad companies were formed to link Virginia cities and towns to the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., carrying freight and also passengers. Many of these passed through Fairfax County, serving Fairfax's smaller rural settlements. Stations built between these localities grew into communities, in their own right. Fairfax Station and Clifton Station are good examples of these railroad-towns.



Telegraph Road Crossing, Defendant's Evidence, Peter Pullman vs. Washington Southern Railway, February 1895

Some tracks passed over existing rights of way, and over roads created for the railroad station communities. This inevitably led to encounters between trains and people. The photographs above were taken as evidence in an 1895 case between Peter Pullman and the Washington

Southern Railway. In the early summer of 1893, Peter Pullman drew his horse and wagon onto the tracks at the Telegraph Road Crossing, near Alexandria. According to his Bill of Complaint in the case, Pullman was hit by a train traveling at 'great velocity.' He claimed to have been thrown 93 feet by the collision, losing consciousness for an hour, breaking his collarbone, crushing his ribs, receiving a groin injury, and cuts and bruises to his head which left him deaf in one ear. He spent 56 days in bed and spent \$600 in doctors' bills. A witness described Pullman as appearing 'strictly sober' before the accident, and another witness stated that the train didn't blow its whistle, on approaching the crossing, as was required. Washington Southern Railway's main defense was that Pullman had plenty of time to see the oncoming train, but chose to try and outrun it. The photographs of the crossing showed that the track was visible for several miles in either direction. The Court found Pullman, not the Railway, negligent.

However, the Court did not always side with the railroad companies. In 1894, Silas Denty's wagon was struck on Hunting Creek Bridge, which was shared by the Washington, Alexandria & Mt. Vernon Electric Railway Co.'s tracks, and the public road. On the train's approach, Denty's horse was spooked and backed the wagon under the barrier separating tracks and road. The train hit the wagon wheel, knocking Denty out of the wagon and 'breaking one of his ribs, the bones in his right hand, bruising and lacerating his face, scalp and head.' A passenger on the train claimed that Denty was drunk and incapable of controlling his horse, and that the train driver immediately cut the engine and applied the brakes on seeing the situation. At trial, the jury could not reach a decision, and the Judge rendered a verdict awarding Denty \$400.



Clifton Station Crossing, Defendant's Evidence, Julius A. Davis' Administrator vs. Southern Railway Co., January 2, 1924

With the advent of cars in the early 20th century, collisions became deadly. Increased vehicle speeds may have lead drivers to believe that they could safely and quickly cross the tracks ahead of incoming trains. This appears to be

the case for Julius Davis in 1924, when he was hit and killed while driving across Clifton Street Crossing. The Administrator of his estate, Isaac H. Davis, produced witnesses who claimed that the train did not use its whistle or bell on approach, and was going too fast. The Southern Railway Co. contended that the signal was, in fact, sounding at the crossing and Davis didn't look before attempting to cross, driving right in front of the train. Ultimately, the Supreme Court of Appeals in Virginia ruled in favor of the Railroad. In 1923, Scott Van Sickler was killed in the same fashion at McLean Station Crossing, the Court also finding for the railroad.

The heirs of T. A. Ramey and Ashton Ramey, killed on the Virginia Midland by a caboose jumping the track near Clifton, have been allowed by the Midland Company \$13,000 in settlement of the claim. The accident occurred last August, and the victims were brothers, well-known cattle dealers.

[Alexandria Gazette, April 15, 1890](#)

Accidents also occurred with pedestrians and bystanders. The extract at left, from the *Alexandria Gazette*, covers the result of an 1890 train derailment near Clifton. Brothers Thomas and Ashton Ramey were attending to their business as cattle dealers, part of their land running alongside the tracks of the Richmond and Danville Railroad

Co., when a train run by the Virginia Midland Railway derailed and crushed them. According to the records from the subsequent court case, their widows received \$6,500 apiece. Ashton's widow was only 18 years old with a baby on the way.

One of our cases concerns the death of a teenager. 16-year-old Frank Jackson, on his way home from a party, crossed the tracks on a well-used footpath at Coral Station. In the Declaration, Jackson's Administrator, C. Vernon Ford, hypothesized that Jackson had become tired, had sat down next to the tracks and fallen asleep. The motorman on the train that hit and killed Jackson, claimed that he thought the boy was a bundle of rags and didn't try to avoid him. Jackson's injuries are described in gruesome detail in the court case.

Woliver was a passenger, as aforesaid, breaking and crushing the side of the said coach and penetrating the same and whilst he was seated therein, striking with great force and violence against and upon his head, and thereby, then and there, inflicting upon the said Silas Woliver such serious and grievous mortal wounds, cuts and fractures, that as the result and consequence thereof the said Silas Woliver afterwards, on the day and year aforesaid, to wit, at the City of Alexandria aforesaid, died intestate:

[Declaration, Silas Wolliver's Administrator vs. Southern Railway Co. & Washington, Alexandria & Mt. Vernon Railway Co., August 14, 1903](#)

Alexandria, train traffic was controlled by a wooden barrier that could swing over either track

Being a passenger could also be dangerous. With many smaller railroads using the larger railroads' tracks, the volume of train traffic presented problems. At the convergence of two tracks at the Royal Street Crossing south of the City of

to warn an oncoming train that their path was impeded. On December 21, 1902, the wooden barrier became loose and swung across the wrong track, hitting a Washington, Alexandria & Mt. Vernon passenger carriage with such 'great force and violence' that the beam broke through the side, killing one passenger and permanently injuring another. The fatal wounds that Silas Wolliver received were described by his estate's Administrator in the court case excerpt above. Because Wolliver died intestate - without a will -Wolliver's father, John, was his heir at law, and received the \$3,250 in damages from Southern Railway Co. The other passenger, Thomas Appleby, according to his Declaration, was hit so hard by the beam, it fractured and crushed 'the plaintiff's skull bone and cranium, and injuring the plaintiff in the cerebrum and cerebellum'. Appleby's doctor stated that he was left with dizziness, epilepsy, insomnia and permanent disability. Appleby's lawyer asked for \$8,000, and the case was settled out of court.



Plaintiff's Evidence, Perry Riffey vs. Southern Railway Co., May 1913

From the 1860s through to the 1940s, the Railway Mail Service handled the bulk of the United States Postal Service's mail. The USPS contracted with the many

different railroads crossing the country, placing mail clerks in uniquely-outfitted carriages wherein the clerks could sort incoming and outgoing mail during transit. The iron pin pictured above is evidence from a court trial involving an accident that befell mail clerk Perry Riffey. Mail carriages were equipped with a metal safety bar, 'securely fastened' with the metal pin shown above, across the outside of the door. The mail clerk leaned out of the door using the bar as a support to throw sorted bags onto a train platform. In the early morning hours of October 1911, Riffey leaned out of his door to deliver a bag of mail at Alexandria Station. The bar was not there and he fell onto the platform injuring himself to such an extent that he required a hernia operation. Mail clerks often removed the bars when expediting the loading of mail bags onto the train, and the Southern Railroad Co. maintained that the clerks were

responsible for checking that the bars were in place at the beginning of their shifts. The Court agreed and ruled for the railroad company.

Gen. PAYNE: (Reading):- "While backing out of siding at Burk's on train extra August 28th, 1890, and when the engine had gotten out of the switch, the air was applied and jerked Mr. Julian Mandley, flagman, off the rear end of the caboose. He was sitting on the railing of the caboose. He broke his right leg, mashed his right arm at the elbow, cutting his head; I did not see him fall. Brakeman Leetsnitzer told me that Mr. Mandley had fallen off the caboose; I then went back and found him on the side of the track; put him in the caboose and carried him to Manassas; left him in charge of Dr. Iden until Dr. O'Brien arrived from Alexandria."

Testimony, Julian R. Mandley's Administrator vs. Richmond & Danville Railroad Co., 1892

was a rear brakeman for the Richmond & Danville Railroad Co., who, in 1890, fell off the back of a train being moved at Burke's Station. The train was being backed out of a side track, ran over his right leg and almost severed his right arm. The conductor, whose testimony can be seen above, had Mandley carried onto the train, which then completed its scheduled journey to Manassas. On reaching the destination, Mandley was taken to the Manassas railroad surgeon for care until the head railroad surgeon arrived. He died of his injuries. In court, Mandley's fellow employees testified that they had seen him sitting on the rear carriage rail, not attending the brake as he should have been, and charged him with negligence. On the day Mandley's court case was lost, his mother, Mary, received news that her other son had been killed falling off a train at Quantico.

Railroad work was so dangerous, that railroad companies throughout the country hired doctors, known as 'railroad surgeons', to work specifically on railroad injuries. Even so, the types of injuries suffered by railroad workers were often so devastating that the surgeons were not able to save the men's lives. Julian Mandley was one such victim. Mandley

The Company denies that it is legally liable, contends that it could defeat any suit that might be brought and states that it is willing to pay the sum mentioned because the decedent was a faithful employee and because it desires to avoid controversy and litigation. Petitioner knows that the result of the suit would be doubtful, her husband left a very small estate, she has no resources with which to carry on litigation and she deems it for wiser to accept what is offered than to take the chances of a suit.

Petition, S. H. Trumble's Administratrix vs. Southern Railway Co., 15th July, 1904

widow, Mary, received a small settlement from the Southern Railway Co. because 'it [the company] desires to avoid controversy and litigation.' The company denied legal liability, and Mary accepted the settlement because she lacked 'resources with which to carry on litigation'.

In almost all of the railroad worker fatality cases in our collection, the railroad companies placed negligence on their employees, often charging that the men knew the work was dangerous and therefore took on the risks when they accepted employment. S. H. Trumble's

broken and wrecked, and the said Richard L. Makeley deceased, was thereby thrown violently from his post on said engine down, and into the midst of said wreck, and under the said engine, tender, and cars, and was thereby so grievously injured, crushed and mangled that he then and there instantly died.

Declaration, Richard L. Makely's Administratrix vs. Richmond & Danville Railroad Co., May 1889

embankment, taking the baggage car with it. The accident became known as the Popes Head Derailment, and caused the deaths of four of the railroad staff onboard. The *Alexandria Gazette* reported the accident, detailing each man's injuries that lead to their 'horrible death'. Engineer Edward Hantzman was found still at his post 'horribly crushed and alive', dying an hour later. Baggage master John Poss was found dead, with his chest stoved in. Fireman Lee Makely and telegraph operator Charles Mayo jumped out of the engine carriage which then rolled on top of them. They were found the next morning and could only be identified by articles of personal adornment. Experts, who testified at the trial, examined the tracks and the engine and determined that nothing had been wrong with either of them. The Master Mechanic for the Virginia Midland Division of the Richmond and Danville Railroad Co. theorized in his testimony that the train may have hit a railroad spike placed on the outer rail, which caused it to lift over the track. The railroad company stated that the accident might have been caused by excessive speed, and therefore the Engineer, who controlled the speed,

The deadliest railroad accident documented in our court records occurred on June 16, 1888, when the engine carriage of a passenger train skipped over the rail at a steep curve and catapulted down an

and the Fireman, who fed the boiler, were to blame. Hantzman's widow received \$1,000 compensation, Makely's widow \$3,000, and Poss and Mayo's families settled out of court.

Along with claims for injuries and fatalities, the Railroad Collection contains Judgments, plats, and assessments involving the Railroads for the years 1866-1906. These records arise from cases involving property damages and takings cases. Known as Condemnation Cases, these disputes involved the railroad companies taking land to widen or expand their tracks. To this day, Condemnation Cases occur in the Fairfax Circuit Court, to establish whether the state or county can take private property for roads and schools, and to assure property owners that they are justly compensated for these takings of property, as set out in §25.1-101 of the Code of Virginia.

For more information on these and other records held at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.

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<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/historic-records-center>