

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

WASHINGTON

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REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR

BUREAU OF SAFETY

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ACCIDENT ON THE  
CHESAPEAKE WESTERN RAILWAY

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LAYMANS, VA.

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JULY 30, 1938.

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INVESTIGATION NO. 2284

SUMMARY

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Inv-2284

Railroad: Chesapeake Western  
Date: July 30, 1938  
Location: Laymans, Va.  
Kind of accident: Head-end collision  
Trains involved: Passenger : Freight  
Train numbers: 4 : 19  
Engine numbers: Motor 50 : 105 - 107  
Consist: Motor Car : 19 cars, caboose  
Speed: 30-40 m.p.h. : 15-20 m.p.h.  
Operation: Timetable and train orders  
Track: Single; 6° curve, 1.5 percent  
descending grade westward  
Weather: Cloudy  
Time: About 10:14 a. m.  
Casualties: 1 killed; 1 injured  
Cause: Lap of train authority due to dual  
train dispatching.

August 26, 1938.

To the Commission:

On July 30, 1938, there was a head-end collision between a passenger motor-car and a freight train on the Chesapeake Western Railway at Laymans, Va., which resulted in the death of one employee and the injury of one dead-head employee.

#### Location and method of operation

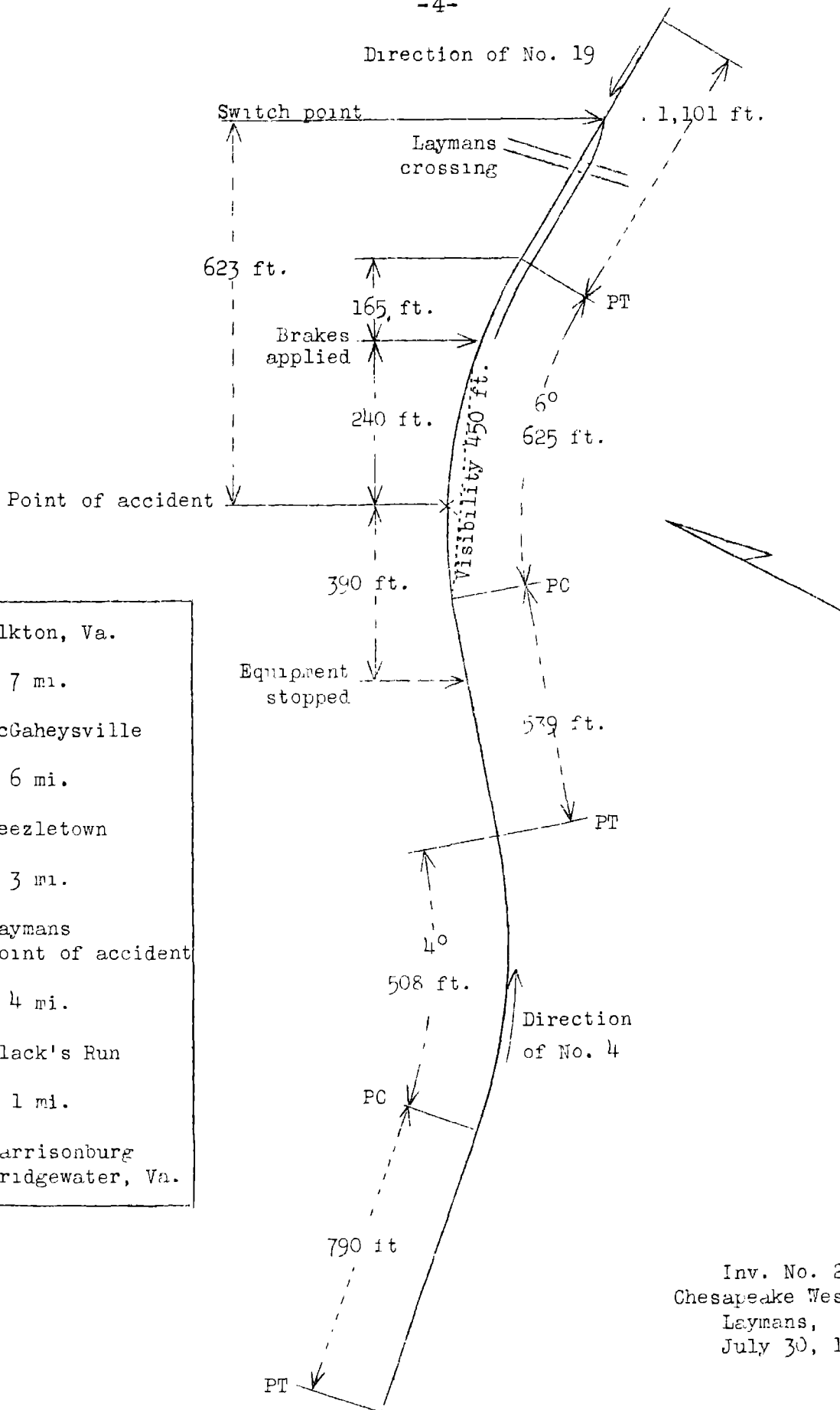
This accident occurred on that part of the Chesapeake Western Railway which extends from Elkton, Va., to Bridgewater, Va., a distance of 27 miles. This is a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred at a point 623 feet west of the east switch of the siding at Laymans. Approaching this point from the east the track is tangent for 1,101 feet, followed by a 6° curve to the left 625 feet in length, the collision occurring on this curve at a point 405 feet from its eastern end. Approaching the point of accident from the west there is a tangent of 790 feet, followed by a 4° curve to the left 508 feet in length, a tangent 539 feet long, and then the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade for westward trains is 1.5 percent descending.

The weather was cloudy at the time of the accident, which occurred about 10:14 a.m.

#### Description

No. 4, an east-bound first-class passenger train, consisted of motor-car 50 and was in charge of Motor Operator L. E. Sigafoose. This train left Harrisonburg at 9:13 a. m., according to the train sheet, on time, and was delayed at Black's Run, about 4 miles west of Laymans, for 43 minutes due to a broken axle. This train then proceeded about 4 miles where it collided with No. 19 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 30 and 40 miles per hour.

No. 19, a west-bound third-class freight train, consisted of 19 cars and a caboose, hauled by engines 105 and 107, and was in charge of Conductor L. E. Winegard and Engineman W. M. Sigafoose and E. R. Winegard. This train left Elkton, 16 miles east of Laymans, at 8:17 a. m., according to the train sheet, 1 hour 12 minutes late. At Keezletown, 3 miles east of Laymans, this train stopped to clear No. 4's schedule but upon receiving permission to proceed to Harrisonburg for No. 4, departed from that point at 9:55 a.m., according to the statement of the crew, 1 hour 52 minutes late, and collided with No. 4 at a point 623 feet



- o Elkton, Va.
- 7 mi.
- o McGaheysville
- 6 mi.
- o Keezletown
- 3 mi.
- o Laymans
- x Point of accident
- 4 mi.
- o Black's Run
- 1 mi.
- o Harrisonburg
- o Bridgewater, Va.

Inv. No. 2284  
 Chesapeake Western Ry.  
 Laymans, Va.  
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west of Laymans while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 10 and 20 miles per hour.

The motor-car was driven back 390 feet and the front end was demolished by the force of the impact. The pilot beam of the leading engine of No. 19 was broken. None of the equipment was derailed. The employee killed was the motor-car operator of No. 4.

#### Summary of evidence

of Engineman W. M. Sigafoose, of engine 105, the leading engine/No. 19, stated that upon leaving Elkton a running test of the brakes was made and that they functioned properly en route. They stopped at Keezletown expecting to meet No. 4 and Brakeman Deal went ahead to the station to flag No. 4 as No. 19 would hold the main track. He said that after waiting about 25 minutes, he received a proceed signal from the brakeman and when pulling ahead the brakeman informed him that No. 4 was disabled and that they were to proceed to Harrisonburg, 8 miles west. When he asked for the order the brakeman replied that the dispatcher was on No. 4 and that No. 19 was to proceed as they were protected by a flag. The engineman stated that approaching the point of the accident he was drifting at a speed of about 20 miles per hour when the head brakeman and fireman shouted warnings, whereupon he applied the brakes in emergency, reversed the engine and opened the sanders. From his position on the outside of the curve he first saw No. 4 when only about 50 feet distant. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of impact to have been between 12 and 15 miles per hour. Engineman Sigafoose stated that if he were on a disabled train having authority to move, he would proceed when able but would call the office if a telephone were available.

Fireman W. P. Sigafoose, of engine 105, corroborated the testimony of Engineman W. M. Sigafoose and stated that his train arrived at Keezletown at 9:30 and departed at 9:55 a.m. He heard Brakeman Deal, upon boarding the engine at Keezletown, inform the engineman that No. 4 was broken down and would be held at Harrisonburg for No. 19. He estimated the speed approaching Laymans to have been about 15 miles per hour. From his position on the engine deck, looking out on the left side, he did not see the approaching motor until it was a very short distance away. He estimated the time of the collision at about 10:15 a. m., at which time the speed had been reduced to 10 or 15 miles per hour.

Engineman E. R. Winegard, of engine 107 of No. 19, corroborated the statement of Engineman Sigafoose in all essential details. He said he proceeded on no further authority than the signal given by the head brakeman. Engineman Winegard said that if he were on a disabled train having authority to move, he would proceed when able but would notify the dispatcher if a telephone were available.

Fireman B. F. Winegard, of engine 107, was looking out the cab window on the left side when he saw No. 4 approaching about 5 or 6 cars lengths away and estimated the speed of his train at the time of impact to have been between 15 and 20 miles per hour and that of No. 4 between 30 and 35 miles per hour.

Head Brakeman Deal, of No. 19, stated that upon stopping on the main track about 150 yards east of the station at Keezletown, he went ahead to flag No. 4 and that after waiting about 30 minutes, he called the Harrisonburg office on the telephone and received verbal instructions from General Manager Thomas, who answered the telephone, to proceed to Harrisonburg as No. 4 was disabled and would be held there until their arrival. He then signalled No. 19 ahead, boarded the head engine, and informed Engineman Sigafoose of these instructions. He thought that they left Keezletown about 10 a. m. and said that approaching Laymans, he was on the fireman's side when he saw No. 4 not more than 12 or 15 car lengths distant approaching rapidly around the curve on which the accident occurred, whereupon he shouted a warning to the engineman. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of collision to have been about 15 miles per hour and the speed of No. 4 about 40 miles per hour.

Conductor L. E. Winegard, of No. 19, stated that no terminal test of the air brakes was made before leaving Elkton. He said that his train arrived at Keezletown about 9:30 a. m. and left at 9:55 a. m. and he left that point without receiving authority to move against No. 4 or without knowing that authority had been received. He estimated the speed of his train approaching Laymans at 20 or 25 miles per hour. Conductor Winegard stated that if he were on a disabled train holding authority to move, he would not consider it obligatory to call the office when able to proceed.

Rear Brakeman S. G. Winegard, of No. 19, corroborated the testimony of Conductor L. E. Winegard in all essential details.

Round-house Foreman Hammer, who also acts as car inspector at Elkton, stated that it was not the practice to make terminal air-brake tests on trains before leaving that point and that such test was not made on No. 19 on the date of the accident.

The statement of M. A. Shiflett, a dead-head employee, the only passenger on No. 4 and who was seriously injured and in a critical condition, was taken at a hospital. He stated that before leaving Black's Run, he heard Dispatcher Lam tell Motor-car Operator Sigafoose to look out for smoke signals as he had heard that the general manager was letting No. 19 come in. Shiflett estimated the speed of No. 4 approaching the point of accident at about 30 miles per hour.

Albert Carickoff, a mechanic who was called to make repairs to motor 50 at Black's Run stated that he completed the repairs at 10 a. m. and that before leaving the scene he heard Dispatcher Lam, who was also at the scene, tell Motor-car Operator Sigafoose to go ahead and that the dispatcher would report at the office and call the freight and that the motorman should look out for a smoke signal. He stated that the motor-car operator appeared normal.

Dispatcher Lam stated that upon being informed by telephone that the motor on No. 4 was disabled at Black's Run he consulted with General Manager Thomas, then ordered a mechanic to that point to make repairs, after which he drove to Black's Run to render any assistance possible. He said that repairs to the motor were completed about 10 a. m. and that he told Motor-car Operator Sigafoose before leaving to watch out for smoke. He then returned to the office where he learned that General Manager Thomas had instructed No. 19 to advance to Harrisonburg against No. 4 whereupon he attempted, through telephone communication, to have the trains flagged at outlying points but failing in this, he drove an automobile to Laymans in order to flag them himself but he heard the crash of the collision when still some distance from that point. Dispatcher Lam stated that frequently he is obliged to leave the office in the performance of his various duties and that on such occasions his duties relative to the movement of trains are performed by his sister, Ola Lam, a stenographer. He also stated that it has not been the established practice for a train which has been disabled and which is again ready to move, to call the office for instructions before proceeding, providing such train has authority to move, and that he had no knowledge that the general manager had advanced No. 19 on this occasion. Because of short sidings, he said that at meeting points the freight trains usually hold the main track and after flagging the passenger train is headed through the siding and that it is this practice which gave rise to the expression, "Look out for smoke." He said he had acted in the capacity of clerk and train dispatcher at Harrisonburg for approximately eight years, during which time no rules governing his duties or the movement of trains had been in effect. In recent years the train dispatching has been done through the means of the commercial telephone system.

Stenographer Ola Lam corroborated the testimony of Dispatcher Lam relative to performing the dispatching duties at such times when the latter is absented from the office.

General Manager Thomas stated that upon receiving advice that No. 4 was disabled at Black's Run, he instructed Dispatcher Lam to send a mechanic to that point to make repairs, and shortly after Dispatcher Lam left the office he received a telephone call from Brakeman Deal of No. 19. He informed the brakeman that No. 4 was disabled and instructed him to advise No. 19 to continue to Harrisonburg and to look out for No. 4 at Harrisonburg. He corroborated the testimony of Dispatcher Lam relative to attempting to prevent the accident by having the trains flagged at some outlying point. He stated that the practice of a train which had been disabled to call the office for instructions before proceeding had long been an unwritten rule and that he had never known of an instance where a train which had been disabled would proceed without getting in touch with the office and it was for that reason that he had instructed No. 19 to advance against No. 4. He stated that he had on rare occasions in the past advanced inferior trains on verbal telephone instructions. He also stated that he has been general manager of the Chesapeake Western Railway for approximately 12 years and that during that period no rules governing the operation of trains have been in effect and that the method of operation in effect at the time he became general manager had been continued.

#### Observations of Commission's Inspectors

Beginning at a point 165 feet east of the point of accident and continuing to the point of accident, the Commission's inspectors observed marks on the high rail of the curve made by sliding wheels. From the point of the first mark the maximum visibility westward from the left side of an engine cab is 450 feet and No. 19 traveled approximately 240 feet from this point to the point of impact.

An inspection of motor 50 at Elkton after the accident showed the gear-shift lever was in high-speed forward position. The hand lever was torn from its position and it was impossible to determine its position at the time of the accident. The brake shoes and brake rigging were intact and in position. It could not be determined whether the brakes on the motor had been set prior to the time of the accident.

#### Discussion

At a point one mile east of Harrisonburg the motor car of No. 4 became disabled, due to a broken axle, and the motor-car operator reported it by telephone to the office in Harrisonburg.



On instructions of the general manager the dispatcher arranged for a mechanic to go to the scene to make necessary repairs, and then drove by automobile to the motor-car to assist in any manner he could. Within about 30 minutes the repairs were made and as No. 4 departed the dispatcher cautioned the motor-car operator to look out for smoke, meaning that No. 19 might be found on the main track at some station. The dead-head employee said that he heard the dispatcher tell the motor-car operator to look out for smoke signals as he had heard that the general manager was letting No. 19 come to Harrisonburg; however, the dead-head employee was in a critical condition when this statement was made and there was no other evidence to support it, while the dispatcher said he had no reason to think that No. 19 had been instructed to proceed to Harrisonburg. Upon returning to the office the dispatcher was informed that the general manager had given No. 19 verbal instructions to proceed from Keezletown to Harrisonburg against No. 4. The dispatcher immediately tried through telephone communication to have the trains flagged but failing in this he drove by automobile in order to flag them himself, but was some distance from the point of accident when he heard the crash of the collision, which occurred on a curve where the visibility was greatly restricted.

No. 4 was superior by class to No. 19 and it was so understood by all persons involved in the accident. When the motor-car operator reported the broken axle to the dispatcher no order or instruction was given to the former restricting the rights of No. 4, nor were the rights of that train restricted at any time thereafter; however, the general manager said that it had been the practice during the past twelve years that when a train broke down the crew would call the office before proceeding and for this reason he thought the motor-car operator would call the office before departing. Since the motor-car operator was killed in the accident it is not known what his understanding of the custom was, but since the dispatcher was present and permitted No. 4 to depart, it is apparent that the motor-car operator thought he had a right to proceed without calling the office. The general manager's statement was not supported by the seven members of the crew of No. 19, as they stated that they did not consider it obligatory to call the office before proceeding following a break-down. If the general manager and employees had had a common understanding of the method of operation as involved in this instance this accident would not have occurred.

According to the evidence, during the dispatcher's absence from his office to visit the disabled motor the general manager took the responsibility of train dispatching when he authorized No. 19 to proceed beyond Keezletown. It also appears from the evidence that the dispatcher must absent himself from his office due to varied duties and that either the general manager or the stenographer does the train dispatching during his absence. A dangerous condition is thus created when such haphazard methods are practiced in a train-dispatching office. Had no one except the dispatcher handled the train movements involved in this instance, or had methods of operation been based upon definite rules instead of customs and assumptions, it is probable that this accident would not have occurred.

#### Conclusion

This accident was caused by a lap of the rights of two opposing trains due to the lack of a common understanding of the method of operation, and by irregular practice in a train-dispatching office.

#### Recommendation

It is recommended that responsible officials of this railroad give immediate consideration to adopting a safe method of operation.

Respectfully submitted,

W. J. PATTERSON,

Director.