

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY CONCERNING AN
ACCIDENT ON THE WESTERN MARYLAND RAILWAY NEAR HENRY,
W. VA., ON NOVEMBER 13, 1933.

January 18, 1934.

To the Commission:

On November 18, 1933, there was a rear-end collision between a freight train and a passenger train on the Western Maryland Railway near Henry, W. Va., which resulted in the injury of one railway mail clerk.

Location and method of operation

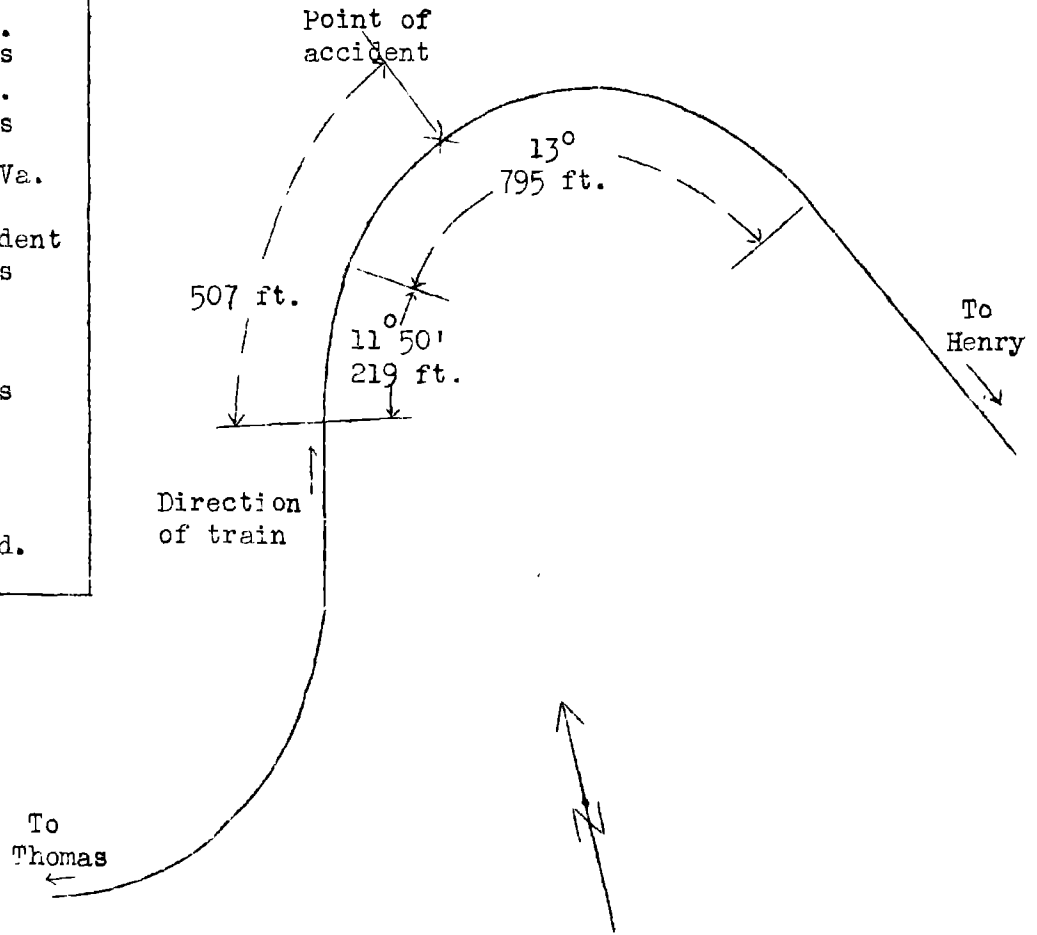
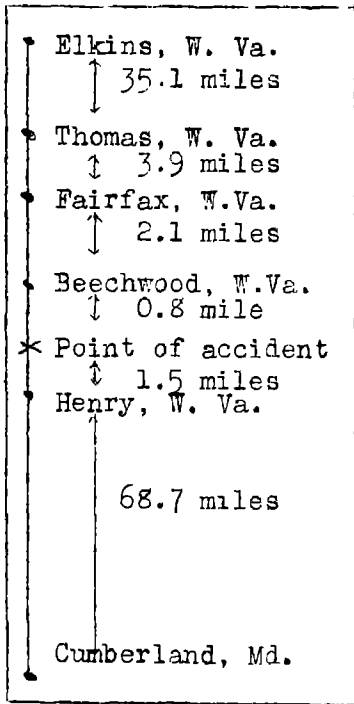
This accident occurred on the Thomas Subdivision of the Elkins Division, extending between Elkins, W. Va., and Cumberland, Md., a distance of 112.1 miles; in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred at a point about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles west of the passing track at Henry; approaching this point from the west, there is a series of very sharp curves and short tangents, followed by a compound curve to the right 1,014 feet in length, the first 219 feet of this curve being $11^{\circ}50'$ and the last 795 feet being 15° , the accident occurring on the 13° portion of the curve at a point about 507 feet from the extreme western end of the curve. The grade for east-bound trains is descending for about 3 miles to the point of accident and beyond, varying from 0.30 to 1.833 percent, and is 1.10 percent at the point of accident.

Owing to a bank on the inside of the curve the view of a caboose standing at the point of accident was restricted to a distance of about 300 feet from the engineman's side of the cab of an east-bound engine.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which was estimated to have occurred between 4:07 and 4:10 p.m.

Description

East-bound freight train extra 755 consisted of 49 loaded coal cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 755, and was in charge of Conductor Thomas and Engineman Heyer. This train left Thomas, 8.3 miles west of Henry, at 3:58 p.m., according to the train



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sheet, only 10 minutes ahead of the schedule of train no. 4, and while proceeding down the grade several cars in the middle of the train were derailed, apparently on account of a broken flange, resulting in the train being stopped, about 4:05 p.m., with the caboose about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles west of the passing track at Henry, and after standing at this point a few minutes the caboose was struck by train no. 4.

East-bound passenger train no. 4 consisted of 1 coach and 1 combination mail and baggage car, hauled by engine 157, and was in charge of Conductor Brown and Engineman Harrison. This train left Thomas at 3:49 p.m., according to the train sheet, 1 minute late. After traveling about 3 miles the train slowed down and picked up the flagman of extra 755, who had dropped off en route, and then proceeded to Beechwood, located 2.3 miles west of Henry, where a flag stop was made to take on passengers. Train no. 4 departed from Beechwood and had traveled about 0.8 mile when it collided with the rear end of extra 755 while moving at a speed variously estimated to have been from 3 to 10 miles per hour.

The wooden caboose of extra 755 was badly damaged, while the pilot beam of engine 157, of train no. 4, was broken off and the engine truck forced back against the driving wheels.

Summary of evidence

Flagman Nine, of extra 755, stated that before leaving Thomas the conductor instructed him to get off en route and protect against train no. 4 and to have that train run around extra 755 through the passing track at Henry. When the train left Thomas the flagman rode the caboose and the conductor started over the train and turned up retainers. Flagman Nine got off the caboose about 3 miles east of Thomas and flagged train no. 4, boarded the engine, and told the engineman what the conductor had instructed him to do, and also told him there would not be any one on the caboose. Leaving Fairfax, a mile farther east, the flagman rode on the left side of engine 157 and afterwards he looked across the valley, the track forming a horseshoe curve in this vicinity, and saw the rear end of his own train moving by Beechwood, located 2.1 miles east of Fairfax. Train no. 4 stopped at Beechwood and took on passengers and then moved cautiously down the grade. Flagman Nine said that the engineman made an air-brake application west of the curve involved and released after getting on the curve, and that immediately thereafter he applied the air brakes in emergency, at which time the flagman estimated the speed to have been about 6 or 8 miles per hour, and then the collision occurred; he estimated the speed at this time to have been not more than 3 miles per hour.

Conductor Thomas, of extra 755, stated that after leaving Thomas he went over to the head end of the train, turning up retainers; he reached the engine while passing Fairfax and notified

his engine crew that their train would go to Henry and let train no. 4 run around them through the passing track at that point. Conductor Thomas remained at the head end so that he and the head brakeman would be ready to pick up cars when the engine was cut off at Henry for the purpose of going to Keapton mines. Later he went out on top of the cars again and rode on about the fourth or fifth car from the engine, with the head brakeman about five cars back of him, in readiness to apply hand brakes on the cars in order to hold the train when it was left on the main track at Henry. After passing Beechwood, however, his train stopped due to the derailment of several cars in the middle of the train on account of a broken flange, and he had gotten off and was opposite the derailed cars when the following train struck the caboose; Conductor Thomas said that the head brakeman had gone farther back toward the rear of the train.

Head Brakeman Carter, who was in the caboose at Thomas, stated that after leaving that point he turned up retainers on the rear portion of the train and remained on top of the cars until the derailment occurred, at which time he said he was riding on about the eighth or tenth car; he immediately got off and started back for the purpose of affording additional protection against train no. 4, but had gone only 10 or 15 car lengths before the following train struck the caboose. Engineman Heyer stated that the movement contemplated was of regular occurrence, and that as usual his train was running ahead of the first-class train from an open telegraph office without orders, but under protection of the flagman. Statements of Fireman Kittle did not bring out anything additional of importance.

Engineman Harrison, of train no. 4, said he picked up the flagman and was told the freight train would go to Henry and that the passenger train would run around it through the passing track at that point, also that there was nobody on the caboose ahead. After leaving Fairfax the engineman saw the rear end of extra 755 in the distance as it passed Beechwood. Train no. 4 stopped at Beechwood and took on passengers, then proceeded, and when approaching the curve involved Engineman Harrison applied the brakes and reduced the speed from 13 or 15 miles per hour to 10 or 12 miles per hour. He then released the brakes and as he did so he saw the caboose only a short distance ahead of him and immediately applied the brakes in emergency, but not enough time had elapsed to fully recharge the train line and restore full braking power; he estimated the speed at the time of the accident to have been about 4 miles per hour. Engineman Harrison was of the opinion that proper flag protection had been provided, saying that he was flagged practically every day, also that he had stopped on different occasions when an air hose on the train ahead had burst under conditions as unfavorable as those existing at this particular location. He was thoroughly familiar with this territory, said the air brakes had been tested and also worked properly en route, and attributed the accident to an error of judgment on his part in that he released the air brakes too

soon, instead of keeping them applied until his engine had rounded the curve.

Rule 36 of the operating rules of this railway provides that inferior trains must clear the time of following superior trains not less than 5 minutes, but must be clear at the time a first-class train is due to leave the next station in the rear where time is shown. When questioned as to this movement ahead of a first-class train, which the evidence indicated was of more or less daily occurrence, Superintendent Williamson stated that he did not consider that extra 755 had sufficient time to go from Thomas to Henry ahead of train no. 4 and get into clear on the passing track at that point as required by the rules and that so far as his knowledge was concerned it was not the practice to permit freight trains to proceed ahead of passenger trains in this manner unless some form of order was given. Employees were expected to live strictly up to the rules, but in this particular instance he said that had extra 755 remained at Thomas, the train dispatcher would not have been able to run train no. 4 around the freight train at that point as he does not have control over yard movements and there is no passing siding at Thomas, only a yard, one end of which is used for backing in empty cars and the other end for loaded cars, and there is no track where a train can pull through nor is there any passing siding between Thomas and Henry. In regard to the rule that requires the next brakeman to take the place of the flagman at the rear of the train when the flagman goes back to protect, he said that no instructions had been issued modifying the rule.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the operation of an extra train ahead of a first-class train without sufficient time to clear as required by the rules, and by the failure of Engineman Harrison of train no. 4 properly to control the speed of his train after being flagged.

The evidence in this case discloses a reckless disregard of operating rules and safeguards provided for the operation of first-class trains; it appears that it was common practice for extras to run ahead of first-class trains on short time and without special authorization, notwithstanding that the rules required them to clear following superior trains at least 5 minutes and also to be into clear by the time a first-class train is due to leave the last station in rear where time is shown; a flagman would then be dropped off with instructions to tell the following engineman where and how he could pass, leaving no one in the caboose to flag in case of an unexpected stop because both the conductor and head brakeman would remain at or near the head end, thus disregarding another requirement of the rules to the effect that the next brakeman should take the flagman's place. The

statements of employees involved clearly showed that this practice prevailed but Superintendent Williamson denied that he had any knowledge of it; if this is the case, then Superintendent Williamson and his subordinate officials have failed in one of the most important duties of officials in the operating department, namely, to see that rules provided for guidance of employees and safe operation of trains are properly enforced and obeyed by all concerned.

After picking up the flagman of extra 755 Engineman Harrison fully understood the intended movement; the arrangement was that the passenger train would follow the freight train down the grade to Henry where the passenger train would run around the freight train through the siding; he also knew that there was no one on the caboose to provide flag protection in the event of a sudden stop, and was familiar with this method of train operation by reason of previous experience. Under such circumstances the only way Engineman Harrison could operate his train in safety was to be prepared to stop within his range of vision, and unusual care was necessary in view of the heavy grade and many sharp curves in the vicinity; had he held the brakes applied after entering the curve on which the accident occurred it is probable he would have been able to stop in time to avert the accident. Engineman Harrison made an error in judgment, but, as indicated in the foregoing, primary responsibility for this accident rests upon officials of the Western Maryland Railway for permitting the unsafe practices disclosed by this investigation.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.