

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN
RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED
ON THE LINE OF THE READING COMPANY NEAR LAUREL,
PA., ON FEBRUARY 26, 1929.

May 31, 1929.

To the Commission:

On February 26, 1929, there was a head-end collision between a passenger train and a work train on the line of the Reading Company near Laurel, Pa., resulting in the injury of 3 passengers, 1 mail clerk, 5 train employees and 20 other employees, one of whom subsequently died.

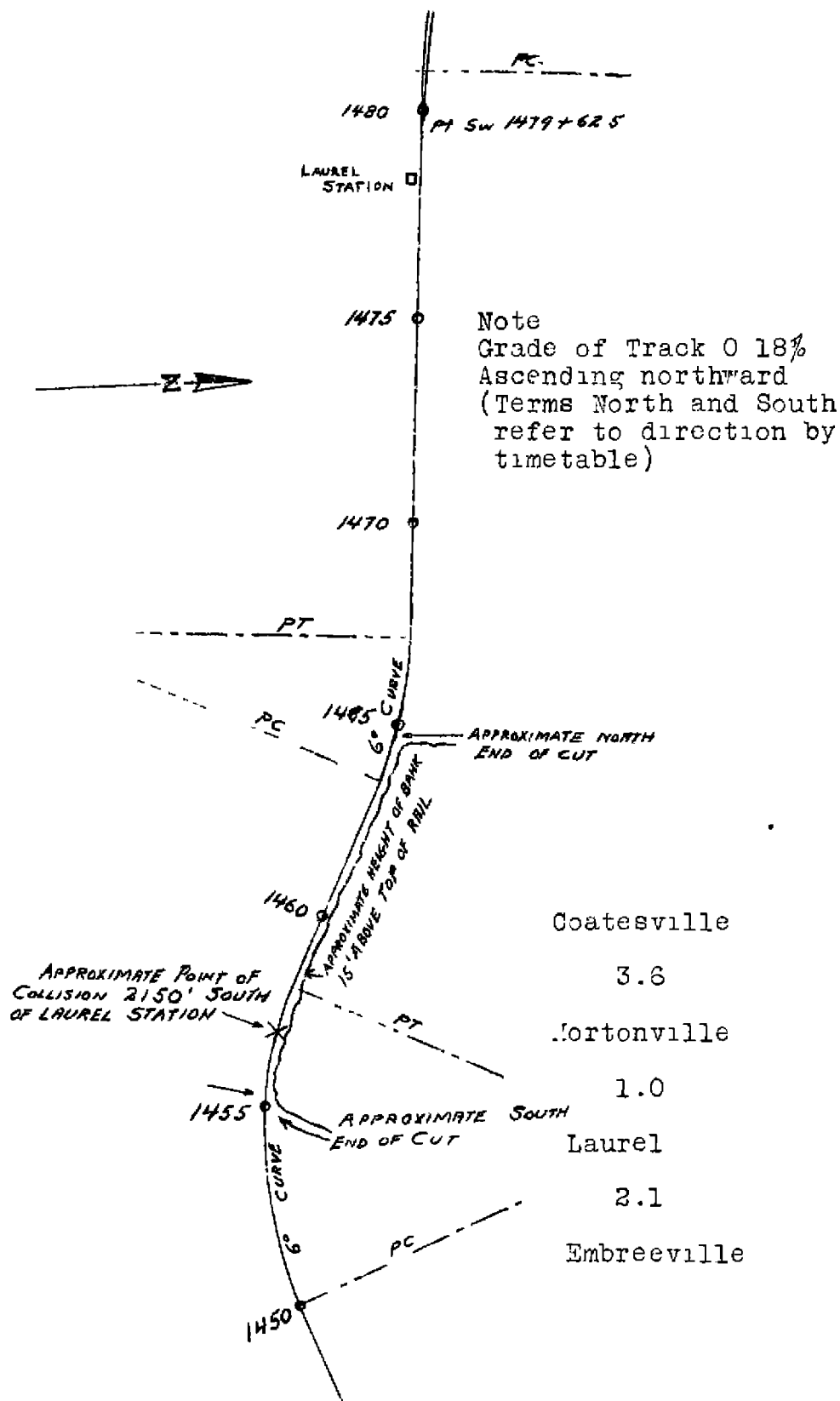
Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Wilmington and Columbia Division, on what is known as the Wilmington & Northern Branch, which extends between Birdsboro, Pa., and Wilmington, Del., a distance of 63.4 miles; this is a single-track railroad over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders and a manual block-signal system. The accident occurred at a point 2,150 feet south of the station at Laurel; approaching this point from the north, time-table direction, the track is tangent for a distance of about 550 feet, followed by a 60° curve to the left 800 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point about 125 feet from its northern end. Approaching from the south the track is tangent for a distance of about 650 feet, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade is slightly descending for southbound trains. Owing to an embankment on the inside of the curve the view of the point of accident is restricted to about 300 feet.

A light rain was falling at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 8.20 a.m.

Description

Work extra 1330 consisted from south to north of engine 1330, one coach, one carload of ties, one tool car, one idler car, and the wrecking derrick; it was in charge of Conductor Boyd and Engineman Elliott. Before departing from Coatesville, 4.6 miles north of Laurel, at 7.30 a.m., a copy of train order No. 5, Form 19, was received, reading as follows:



ACCIDENT NEAR LAUREL, Pa.

"C&E No. 702
C&E Eng 1330

Eng 1330 works extra 7.15 a.m. until 9.45 a.m. between Mortonville and Embreeville protecting against No. 702 and not protecting against extra trains. Look out for cars on main track at Pole 20-E, about one and one half mile south of Laurel not protected."

Mortonville is located 1 mile north of Laurel, while Embreeville is located 2.1 miles south thereof; at the time of the accident the block extended from Mortonville to Embreeville. Work extra 1330 left Coatesville and proceeded to a point about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles south of Laurel, in order to rerail a car, the fifth car ahead of the caboose, in southbound freight train No. 760; that portion of train No. 760 ahead of the fifth car had continued on its journey, leaving the rear portion standing on the main track. Before the derailed car could be reached by work extra 1330, however, it was necessary to couple to the caboose and four rear cars of train No. 760 and move them back to the passing track at Laurel, located on the west side of the track, the south switch being about 100 feet north of the station. While this back-up movement was in progress, after the caboose and four cars had been moved back slightly more than 1 mile, at a speed estimated to have been from 5 to 10 miles per hour, the north end of the work extra collided with train No. 702.

Southbound passenger train No. 702 consisted of gas-electric car No. 76, this being a combination passenger, baggage, and mail car, of all-steel construction, and was in charge of Conductor Workman and Motorman Willard. At Coatesville a copy of train order No. 5, Form 19, previously quoted, was received. Train No. 702 departed from Coatesville and on being flagged by the flagman of work extra 1330 was brought to a stop just north of Mortonville; the flagman was picked up and then the train moved ahead a few car-lengths, arriving at Mortonville at 8.14 a.m., at which point a permissive card, Form 379, was received, reading as follows:

"To Engineman, train No. 702;

Proceed, expecting to find a train in the block between this station and next open block station.

(Sgd) C.H.Steen, Signalman.

Enginemen receiving this card will proceed as indicated."

Train No. 702 departed from Mortonville at 8.18 a.m., according to the train sheet, three minutes late, made a stop at Laurel, then proceeded, and while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 10 miles per hour the work extra was observed approaching around the curve. Train No. 702 had been brought practically to a stop when it collided with work extra 1330.

None of the equipment in either train was derailed; the front end of motor car 76 was badly damaged, and seats were torn loose and partitions bent, while the cars in work extra 1330 were damaged more or less. The employee who subsequently died was the flagman of work extra 1330.

Summary of evidence

Conductor Boyd, of work extra 1330, stated that before departing from Coatesville he read train order No. 5 to Flagman Knabb, told the flagman that it was the intention to shift the derrick to the south end of the work train after the caboose and four rear cars of train No. 760 had been moved back to Laurel, and instructed the flagman to afford protection against train No. 702. Work extra 1330 then departed from Coatesville with Conductor Boyd riding on the left side of the engine, he said that when approaching Mortonville he shouted across the boiler to Engineman Elliott to reduce speed and whistle out a flag, which was done, and the engineman then shouted back that the flagman was out. The conductor's reason for having the flagman drop off at Mortonville was the fact that there was an operator at that point and a telephone by means of which the flagman could be reached. Conductor Boyd was unaware of anything wrong while returning northward to Laurel siding with the rear cars in train No. 760, at which time he was riding in the tool car and he had no idea as to how train No. 702 could have gotten down to the point of accident. Conductor Boyd further stated that he specifically instructed Flagman Knabb as to what movements were contemplated and that he should hold train No. 702 but did not instruct the flagman further in detail as the flagman was aware of the contents of train order No. 5, and he expected him to hold train No. 702 at Mortonville. He did not think it was his duty to issue instructions to this effect, however, since he had told the flagman it would be necessary to move the caboose and four cars back to Laurel. Conductor Boyd said that Flagman Knabb had been flagging for him for more than five years and that he had never previously had cause to think that the flagman did not know what was required to be done, the custom being to drop the flagman at any point, with or without instructions, and if the flagman is dropped off at any point without instructions he is expected to hold following trains. On the other hand, however, Conductor Boyd said he would often drop the flagman in the yard right ahead of passenger trains and the flagman would stop them and then bring them on down as the work train was moving away.

Engineman Elliott, of work extra 1330, stated that he had no understanding with Conductor Boyd or Flagman Knabb as to where the flagman was going to hold train No. 702, although when the flagman dropped off at Mortonville the engineman was satisfied that protection was being afforded against train No. 702. Middle Brakeman Prosser stated that before departing from Coatesville he heard Conductor Boyd tell Flagman Knabb what movements were contemplated and also instruct the flagman to afford protection against train No. 702; the middle brakeman understood this to mean to protect the work extra against train No. 702 at all times. Middle Brakeman Prosser was of the opinion that since Flagman Knabb was an experienced railroad man he should have known what to do and he could not understand why train No. 702 left Mortonville when Flagman Knabb was aboard it, and then proceeded past Laurel, as it was understood that the work extra would have to pull the cars back to Laurel before the wrecking derrick could reach the derailed car. No statement was obtained from Flagman Knabb prior to his death, while the statements of other members of the crew of work extra 1330 developed nothing additional of importance; their estimates as to the speed of the work extra at the time of the accident ranged from 6 to 10 miles per hour.

Motorman Willard, of train No. 702, stated that after Flagman Knabb was picked up at Mortonville he inquired of the flagman as to what train No. 702 should do, and the flagman replied that he did not know, merely saying that work extra 1330 had gone. Motorman Willard said that he made a station stop at Laurel, in order to let the track-walker get off, and then proceeded, and when a speed of about 10 miles per hour was attained he shut off and permitted the motor car to drift. On seeing steam rising above the embankment on the inside of the curve he sounded the whistle and said that his car had practically stopped when the collision occurred. Motorman Willard said that he entered the block at Mortonville on a permissive card and that he proceeded expecting to find work extra 1330 "where the order said, about one and one half miles south of Laurel."

Conductor Workman and Baggage-master Ayers, of train No. 702, were interviewed at the hospital; the conductor stated that he had no conversation or understanding with Motorman Willard or Flagman Knabb and was depending on train orders for the movement of his train. Baggage-master Ayers stated that he heard Flagman Knabb tell Motorman Willard to look out for the wrecker at a point 1 or 1½ miles south of Laurel.

Dispatcher Lichty said the operator at Mortonville told him he could see the flagman of extra 1330 talking with Road Foreman of Engines Moll, and supposing that the road foreman and perhaps the trainmaster would want to reach the

point where the derailed car was blocking the track, the dispatcher told the operator to allow train No. 702 to proceed on a permissive card, being of the opinion that proper protection was being given. Road Foreman of Engines Moll said he read the operator's copy of the train order held by train No. 702, the dispatcher having sent the operator a copy for the operator's information. He saw Flagman Knabb in the baggage compartment of the motor car but did not talk with him, and said he did not dream that the crew of the work extra would pull the rear end of the derailed freight train back to Laurel, being of the opinion they could rerail the car and then push the rear of the freight train ahead of them to Embreeville, clearing train No. 702 at the latter point.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of the crew of the work extra to have a definite understanding as to what protection was to be provided against train No. 702, for which Conductor Boyd is primarily responsible.

Conductor Boyd said he informed Flagman Knabb as to the contents of train order No. 5 and also told the flagman what movements were contemplated by the work train. On the other hand, however, he said he instructed the flagman to protect against train No. 702 but had no definite understanding as to where that train should be held, merely telling the flagman to take care of train No. 702. The conductor expected the flagman to hold it at Mortonville, and if the flagman thoroughly understood what movements were to be made, then he should have held the train at that point. Other testimony indicated that at times the flagman would stop a train and then bring it down to some indicated point, and apparently this was the flagman's intention in this case. Engineman Elliott saw the flagman get off at Mortonville and this was the extent of his knowledge as to what measures had been taken for the safety of his train.

All of the employees involved were experienced men and none of them had been on duty contrary to any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.