

IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
SEABOARD AIR LINE RAILROAD AT SEACOAST, VA.,
ON SEPTEMBER 27, 1919.

November 3, 1919.

On September 27, 1919, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the Seaboard Air Line Railroad at Seacoast, Va., which resulted in the death of 2 employees and 1 trespasser. After investigation of this accident, the Chief of the Bureau of Safety reports as follows:

The portion of the Virginia Division of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad on which this derailment occurred is a single-track line, over which train movements are governed by time-table and train orders, no block signal system being in use. Seacoast is not considered a station and does not appear on the time-table. It is a siding 1,966 feet in length, connected at both ends with the main track, both ends being protected by Hays derrails operated independently of the main track switches. Approaching the siding from the north the track is straight for a distance of 2,949 feet and the view of the north switch is unobstructed for this distance. The track is practically level, except for a slight depression passing under a Norfolk & Western Railroad over-head bridge, located 960 feet north of the north switch. The switch stand at the north end of the siding at Seacoast is on the right side of the track, looking south, 7 feet from the right-hand rail. It is operated by a vertical rotating lever, weighted on the extreme end, and a suitable arrangement is provided for latching and locking. The color indications of both the targets and lights are white for the main track and red for the side track. Each target presents an area of 210 square

inches and is located on the mast about 70 inches above the track. The switch lamp is provided with corrugated glass discs and is located 20 inches above the targets.

The train involved in this accident was southbound passenger train No. 5, en route from Washington, D. C. to Birmingham, Ala. This train was in charge of Conductor Kennett and Engineer Smith and consisted of locomotive 834, 4 all-steel box cars equipped for passenger train service, 3 baggage cars, 1 combination baggage and passenger car, 1 coach, 2 sleeping cars, and 1 dining car, all of all-steel construction. It left Richmond, Va. at 9.49 p.m., 4 minutes late, left Petersburg, Va., 22.9 miles south of Richmond and 3.3 miles north of Seacoast, at 10.34 p.m., 2 minutes late and at 10.45 p.m., while running at a speed of about 30 miles an hour, entered Seacoast siding at the north switch and was derailed when it struck the Hays derail located 225 feet south of the switch. The weather at the time was clear.

The locomotive and 4 steel box cars were derailed, the engine coming to rest on its left side about 227 feet south of the derail. The front truck was badly broken and the cab practically demolished. The tender remained in a practically upright position, coming to a stop diagonally across the siding and in close contact with the rear end of the engine, with the cylinder of the tender torn from its frame. The first box car came to rest in an upright position diagonally across the track, its forward end being badly bent inward and the trucks displaced. The second box car also came to a stop diagonally across the track, but sustained no serious damage with the exception of the trucks, which were displaced. The third box car remained upright and

sustained only slight damage, while the fourth car had only its rear trucks derailed and was not damaged. The engineman and fireman were killed as was also a colored trespasser who was stealing a ride on the train.

Conductor Kennett of train No. 5, stated that he was riding on the ninth car in the train at the time of the accident and the first he noticed of anything wrong was a sudden stopping of the train due to the derailment. After getting down on the ground he saw that the switch light at the north end of the siding was not burning and the switch was set for the siding. He said the switch appeared to be in good condition, but looked as though somebody had attempted to bend the targets around so as to give the wrong indication, although they had not succeeded in bending them sufficiently, and that approaching the switch from the north the targets displayed a red indication. He stated further that the switch lock was missing and could not be found, also that a small fire was burning on the bank just to the right of the switch, but in his opinion this fire could hardly have been mistaken by the engineman for a white switch light. He estimated the speed at the time of the derailment at about 25 miles an hour and noticed no application of the brakes before the sudden stop caused by the derailment.

Conductor Powell who was dead-heading on train No. 5, agreed with Conductor Kennett relative to the condition of the switch at the north end of the siding after the derailment, as did also Train Porter Boone and Baggageman Harvey, the latter stating in addition that he discovered a fish plate wedged in between the switch point and the stock rail. The fish plate was exhibited at the investigation held in connection with this accident and

Baggageman Harvey identified it as the one he saw wedged in at the switch point.

Extra Gang Foreman Taylor who was deadheading on train No. 5 stated that after the derailment he went to the switch immediately and found it set for the siding, the ball being turned over for the siding movement, down in the slot, and the latch partly closed. The switch was in good condition but the light was not burning and the red targets were slightly twisted.

Conductor Bobbit stated that he was in charge of Western Union motor car No. 16, on the day of the accident and was working between Burgess and Petersburg, which includes the point of accident. He stated that his train entered the Seacoast siding at the south end to allow train No. 6 to pass, which train was due there at about 8.10 a.m. After train No. 6 passed he pulled out on the main line at the north end of the siding and discovered that the lock was missing. He then transferred the lock from the derailer to the main track switch and locked the switch for the main line. He reported this fact to Train Dispatcher Watkins at about noon. About 20 hours after the derailment a broken switch lock was found in the vicinity of the switch at Seacoast and Conductor Bobbitt stated positively that this was not the one which he transferred from the derailer to the main track earlier in the day. He stated that the lock which he transferred was more rusty than the one found and that the chain attached to it was marred on account of using a log hook in pulling out the staple by which it was fastened to the tie. The chain attached to the lock which was found showed no such marks upon it.

Western Union Lineman Sullivan, who was in charge of the repairs and work on the line on the day of the accident and who was accompanying Conductor Bobbitt on the motor car, confirmed the statements of Conductor Bobbitt relative to finding the lock missing on the main track switch at the north end of the Seacoast siding early on the day of the accident, and relative to transferring the lock from the derailer to the main track switch. He also stated that he heard Conductor Bobbitt report the missing lock to the superintendent's office.

Section Foreman Johnson, in charge of the section on which the accident occurred, stated that he last passed over the track in the vicinity of Seacoast on the day before the accident and noticed that the switches were in proper condition and locked for the main track. At about 1.00 p.m., on the day of the accident he received a message from the superintendent to replace the lock on the derailer at the north end of the Seacoast siding, that the lock on the derailer had been transferred to the north main-track switch. In accordance with this message he sent Nathan Raney, colored roadway employee, to replace lock on the derailer. He said that at about 4.00 p.m., Nathan Raney reported that the lock had been replaced on the derailer as instructed and also told him that he had found the light out at the north main track switch and the wick missing. He replaced the wick with a new one and lighted the lamp. Section Foreman Johnson further stated that the lamp has an 8-day burner but is filled with oil twice a week and inspected daily.

Nathan Raney, colored roadway employee, stated that shortly after noon on the day of the accident he was instructed by

Section Foreman Johnson to go to the Seacoast siding and place lock on the derailler at the north end of the siding. On his way to Seacoast he met Ford, whose work it is to assist in looking after the switch lamps on the section, and Ford told him that there was no wick in the lamp at the main track switch at the north end of the siding. Nathan Ransy stated that he had a new wick in his pocket and after he had applied the lock to the derailler he put this wick in the lamp, cleaned the lamp and lighted it. He stated that at that time the switch was locked for the main line and he left it in proper condition.

Engineman Walker of southbound freight extra 403, the train next preceding train No. 5, stated that he passed Seacoast at about 9.45 p.m., at which time the north switch was set for the main line and he was positive that the light on the switch stand was burning.

Special Agent Horn stated that he arrived at the scene of the accident about 2.30 a.m. Later he made a close inspection of the lamp on the switch stand and found that the wick had been turned down into the oil cup so that it could not be turned up.

This derailment was caused by the train striking a closed derail on a siding after it had entered the siding through a switch which had been opened by some unknown person with malicious intent.

The investigation disclosed the fact that southbound extra 514 passed over the switch at about 9.15 p.m., and that southbound extra 403 passed safely over it at about 9.45 p.m., or about one hour ahead of train No. 5, and nothing wrong with the switch was noticed by the crew of either train. No employee of the

railroad company used this switch between the time extra 403 passed over it and the time of the derailment. The facts that the switch had been set for the siding, the lock missing, the light extinguished and the wick turned down into the cup indicate conclusively that this switch was deliberately opened by some unknown person with malicious intent.

Attention is directed to rules 27 and 686, reading as follows:

27. "A signal imperfectly displayed, or the absence of a signal at a place where a signal is usually shown, must be regarded as a stop signal, and the fact reported to the superintendent."

686. "They (engineemen) are required to observe the position of all switches and know that such switches are right before passing over them".

It is believed that had Engineman Smith been using the proper amount of caution in the operation of his train and had been on the lookout for the signal indicating the position of the switch, he would have seen that the switch light was not burning and would have been able to stop his train in time to avoid the derailment.

No member of the crew of train No. 6, had been on duty to exceed 2 hours and 10 minutes at the time of the accident and all had had at least 12 hours off duty.

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