

## INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN  
RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED  
ON THE WESTERN MARYLAND RAILWAY AT WILLIAMSPORT,  
MD., ON NOVEMBER 27, 1923.

January 22, 1924.

To the Commission:

On November 27, 1923, there was a collision between a freight train and two helper engines on the Western Maryland Railway at Williamsport, Md., resulting in the death of one employee.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on the West Subdivision which extends between Hagerstown and Cumberland, Md., a distance of 79 miles. Between Hagerstown and Williamsport, a distance of 6.7 miles, this is a double-track line, while west of Williamsport it is a single track line, trains are operated by a manual block-signal system. The accident occurred within yard limits, on a westbound siding at the end of double track. Automatic signal A-928, at the end of double-track, is located on the north side of the tracks just east of a public road crossing and normally displays a stop indication, the telegraph office is south of the tracks and just west of the road crossing. At a point 109 feet west of this signal there is a crossover connecting the westbound main track with the single-track; the westbound passing siding, which is 5,569 feet in length, is a continuation of the westbound main track; the accident occurred on this siding at a point 402 feet west of signal A-928, or 253 feet west of the telegraph office. The facing-point crossover switch leading from the westbound track to the single track is normally lined for the siding. The crossover switches are manually operated, by the operator at Williamsport, and when they are lined for a movement through the crossover automatic signal A-928 displays a clear indication. When a westbound

train arrives at Williamsport and finds signal A-928 in the stop position, it is required to stop until switches and signal are lined up for a main track movement, or it may proceed into the passing siding and obtain authority to enter the block by telephone from the west end of the siding. There is no take-siding indicator at this point and when a westbound train is to take the siding it is customary for the operator to give a hand signal to proceed, indicating that the train is to enter the siding but having no other significance. Under the rules extra trains are required to move within yard limits under full control and to stop if main track or sidings which they are using are occupied. The term "full control" is defined in the time-table as meaning "running at a speed that the engineer can stop within half the distance he can see".

Approaching the point of accident from the east there are 1,159 feet of tangent, followed by a curve of 30° to the right 1,076 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve almost at its western end. The grade is slightly ascending for westbound trains. Owing to a large building and an embankment, the view is restricted to about 765 feet. The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 8.40 p.m.

#### Description.

Helper engines 813 and 806, headed east, coupled, in charge of Enginemen Murphy and Holtapple, respectively, were standing on the westbound passing siding a short distance west of the telegraph office. In order to make room on the siding for westbound freight train extra 453, the operator issued verbal instructions for the helper engines to back up to the west end of this siding. This movement was not started until shortly before extra 453 arrived and just after starting, the helper engines became uncoupled, which caused the air brakes to be applied, resulting in the helper engines being brought to a stop a short distance apart, and extra 453 collided with engine 813; which was driven backward, striking engine 806.

Westbound freight train extra 453 consisted of engine 453, 85 cars, helper engine 451, and a caboose, in the order named, and was in charge of Conductor McKane and Enginemen Smith and Harr, respectively. This train left Hagerstown at 8.20 p.m., and stopped at Kemps 0.8 mile east of Williams-

port; approaching Williamsport the engine whistle was sounded calling for a signal, and the operator gave a proceed signal by hand, indicating that the approaching train was to take siding; extra 453 entered the westbound passing siding at a speed estimated to have been 12 or 13 miles an hour and struck helper engine 813.

The front end of engine 453 was considerably damaged; and the engine truck derailed. Engines 813 and 806 also had their front ends damaged. The employee killed was the head brakeman of extra 453, who jumped from the engine just prior to the accident.

#### Summary of evidence.

Operator Steffey, on duty at Williamsport at the time of the accident, stated that the helper engines had been standing for about two hours at the customary place for helpers in the westbound passing track, waiting for instructions. He gave the operator at YD office, located 0.4 mile west of Hagerstown, a clear block for extra 453 at 8.01 p.m. About 8.05 p.m., dispatcher George instructed Operator Steffey, by telephone, to have helper engines 806 and 813 move to the west end of the passing siding at Williamsport, to make room for extra 453, where this train was to wait until the arrival of the eastbound train which these two helper engines were to assist. Firemen Barr and Hannon, of helper engines 813 and 806 respectively, were in the office when extra 453 left Hagerstown and on hearing that train whistle off brakes at that point Operator Steffey verbally instructed them to have the helper engines moved accordingly, one fireman then left the office, but the other remained until extra 453 stopped at Kemps, 0.8 miles east of Williamsport, and when brakes were whistled off at that point, this fireman left the office to go back to the helper engines; he thought this was at about 8.25 p.m. When extra 453 reached a bridge about 2,000 feet east of the telegraph office, Operator Steffey left the office with a white lantern, and, on hearing the exhaust from the helper engines as they started to back-up, he gave a proceed signal with his lantern to extra 453, which was then about opposite the pen stock, located 660 feet east of signal A-928, and this signal was acknowledged by sounding the engine whistle. However, on observing that the helper engines had stopped, he stated he immediately gave extra 453 a stop signal, at which time

it was just east of signal A-938, and, as the engine passed him, at a speed of about 10 or 12 miles an hour, he called to the men on the engine to look out for the helpers. He then started back toward the office and had walked only a few feet when he heard the crash. Operator Steffey further stated that there was a red light on the pilot of helper engine 815, the headlight on engine 453 was burning properly; and he was of the impression that the air brakes were applied in emergency on extra 453 just before the accident occurred.

Fireman Barr, of helper engine 813, stated that he coupled the helper engines about an hour or so before the accident occurred, although this coupling was not tested. He went over to the telegraph office about 15 minutes before the arrival of extra 453, at which time Fireman Hannon of helper engine 806 was there, and the first he knew of extra 453 approaching was on hearing that train whistle off brakes, in the vicinity of Kemps. While in the office he heard operator Steffey inform the dispatcher, by telephone, that extra 453 was whistling off brakes and ask about the helper engines moving to the west end of the siding. He then returned to his engine, sounded a back-up signal, and released the independent brake; Engineman Holtzapple immediately got aboard and started to work steam, whereupon he began to work on the fire. However, just after starting the back-up movement the engines became uncoupled, causing them to come to a stop, and immediately thereafter the collision occurred. Fireman Barr stated that Fireman Hannon left the office ahead of him, was of the opinion that engine 306 started to work steam first, and this caused the helpers to be pulled apart, that helper engine 813 carried no markers, nor was its headlight burning, but the classification signals were lighted, and that the headlight of extra 453 was burning brightly at the time of the accident. He said it was customary for helper engines to stand in the siding at this point and for the operator to tell them when they are to go back.

Fireman Hannon, of engine 806, stated he was aware that extra 453 was approaching when he was in the office, but did not actually see that train until after the helper engines had come to a stop, separated, just prior to the accident.

Engineman Holtzapple, of engine 813, stated that he did not know extra 453 was approaching and did not go over to the telegraph office while at Williamsport nor was he aware

the helper engines were to move to the west end of the siding until Fireman Barr sounded the back-up signal at about 8.36 or 8.37 p.m. He did not see extra 453 until after the helper engines became uncoupled, at which time it was about two car lengths distant.

Engineman Murphy, of engine 806, stated that Fireman Hannon returned to his engine some time before the helpers started to move, and that Fireman Barr, of engine 813, received the information from the operator to move to the west end of the siding.

Dispatcher George stated it was 8.05 p.m. when he first instructed Operator Steffey to have the helper engines back-up to the west end of the siding. At about 8.30 p.m. the operator informed him that extra 453 was approaching, also that he had better have the helper engines back up. Dispatcher George then inquired whether the helper engines had made the back-up movement, and being informed in the negative, issued instructions to have them back up, and shortly afterwards, about 8.40 p.m., Operator Steffey informed him of the accident.

Engineman Smith, of engine 453, stated that the air brakes on his train were tested at Hagerstown, and worked properly in making the stop at Kemps. After the train line was recharged at this point, brakes were whistled off, and the pusher engine worked star first, to bunch the slack, and the train was permitted to drift. On reaching the Conococheague Creek bridge, near Williamsport, the whistle on engine 453 was sounded, at the per stock this whistle was again sounded, for signals, and then the operator gave a proceed signal with his lantern from a point close to the window in the telegraph office, which signal he acknowledged. Engineman Smith stated that although he should have entered the passing siding under full control, he could have brought extra 453 to a stop before reaching signal A-928 had not the operator given him a proceed signal, which he thought indicated that the siding was clear, also that he did not see any stop signal given by the operator subsequent to the proceed signal, although he could see the lantern until the road crossing was reached, at which time he estimated the speed to have been 8 or 10 miles an hour. Engineman Smith said he saw the helper engines when his engine was east of the road crossing, but at this time thought they were on the main track, and did not know definitely that they were on the siding until just after passing the telegraph office, hereupon, when about 6 or 8 car lengths from the helper engines, the conductor shouted and he made

an emergency application of the air brakes and placed the engine in reverse. Engineman Smith further stated he was aware helper engines frequently stood in the so-called pocket on the siding, about where the accident occurred.

Fireman Corbett, of engine #53, stated that Operator Steffey did not give any stop signal, but as the engine passed he shouted to look out for the helocra, at which time he was standing between the rails of the main track directly opposite the telegraph office.

Conductor McKane, of extra #53, stated that the air brakes were tested and worked properly en route, approaching Williamsport he was riding on engine #50, and said that although he could see Operator Steffey's lantern at all times after the proceed signal was given, he did not see any stop signal given subsequently, he further stated that when engine #53 was opposite the telegraph office the operator shouted that the helper engines were close. There was no marker on engine #13, nor was its headlight burning, but the classification signals were lighted. He did not get off the engine until about the time of the collision, and up until this time he thought no emergency application of the air brakes was made. Conductor McKane further stated that immediately after Operator Steffey gave warning of the helper engines, he saw these engines on the siding and shouted to Engineman Smith, and was of the opinion that had the air brakes been applied in emergency at this time the accident would not have occurred.

Engineman Harr, of engine #51, stated his engine was placed in extra #53 just ahead of the caboose and kept the slack pushed in approaching Williamsport. He only felt one jar at the time of the accident, the air brakes going on in emergency, and his engine moved about 75 or 80 feet before coming to a stop.

#### Conclusions.

This accident was caused primarily by the failure of Engineman Smith, of extra #53, to have his train under full control when entering an occupied track within yard limits.

Engineman Smith probably was misled by the hand proceed signal of Operator Steffey; however, he admitted he was aware helper engines made it a practice to stand in the so-called pocket on the siding while waiting at Williamsport, and that he should have had his train under full control within yard limits, and he done so this accident could have been prevented. Furthermore, although he maintains that the air brakes were applied in emergency when Conductor McKane

shouted, at which time engine 453 had just passed the telegraph office, other evidence indicates that this application either was not made until just prior to the accident or was caused by the breaking of the brake pipe when the accident occurred.

Had Operator Steffey ascertained definitely that the helper engines had backed up the siding a sufficient distance before giving extra 453 a hand lantern proceed signal, this accident would undoubtedly have been averted. However, instead of so doing, on hearing the exhausts from these engines he apparently assumed they had gotten under way and would keep a proper distance ahead of extra 453.

The evidence indicates that members of the crews of the helper engines were informed that extra 453 was going to enter the passing siding, however, these helper engines did not start the back-up movement until just before this train entered the siding; furthermore, although these engines had been standing at Williamsport for more than an hour, the coupling between them had not been tested.

All of the employees involved were experienced men. At the time of the accident none of them had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

F. P. BOPLAND,

Director.