

# Back in Time Stagecoach Accidents

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## Back in Time

### Stagecoach Accidents

By Rickie Longfellow

Fortunately, we rarely hear of traffic accidents involving buses, trains, or other highway public transportation vehicles. However, we sometimes hear of snow storms and other extreme weather conditions where a bus is involved in a multiple car pile-up with injuries and even fatalities, or a train that has derailed.

Although the pioneers didn't have to worry about that rare freeway pile-up or train derailment, they did have their share of public transportation accidents. Many of these involved the convenience of stagecoach travel.

A history of stagecoach accidents recorded as early as the 1700s tells of wheels falling off, horses out of control, and brakes failing. Crudely built bridge floors either fell through or shifted causing the stage to overturn. Luckily, there were not many fatalities to people, but the horses pulling these conveyances would occasionally suffer injuries or death.

Today's small bridges over creeks and narrow rivers are sturdy and safe. It takes only a few moments to cross them and many times we do so without even knowing, as the roads and bridges are of similar material. However, early plank and log bridges were a hazard to stagecoach travelers. The planks or logs would move apart or bunch up; either way it caused a tremendous problem for vehicles and horses alike. In the early 1800s, in North Carolina, the front wheels of a coach got stuck in the planks causing the horses to bolt, which pulled the planks along with the coach swiftly across the bridge. The passengers were not injured, but one horse was killed.

Sometimes negligence would be the cause of an accident. In the 1820s, the stage coach companies were in competition. One incident in New York tells of a driver who sped up and tried to pass the competition going uphill. Consequently, he upset the coach with the passengers inside. Again, no one was killed but injuries were reported.

Lastly, "driving under the influence" appears to be a current day offense when it is actually as old as the beverage consumed itself. An accident in the early 1800s reveals one inebriated driver who gathered up enough speed to overturn the coach, seriously injuring some of the passengers. Today we have a series of safety rules in place for our protection when using public transportation, and we have programs in place to discourage drinking and driving or traveling without our shoulder straps or safety belts fastened. Unlike the early pioneers who didn't know if they would complete their journey without incident, we fully expect to do so. In 2007, the overall number of traffic fatalities was the lowest since 1994, and the number of injuries was the lowest since data collecting began in 1988.

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