

Three Asheville Firemen Killed Returning from State Convention in August 1891

Research notes by Mike Legeros

Last updated March 19, 2023

Introduction

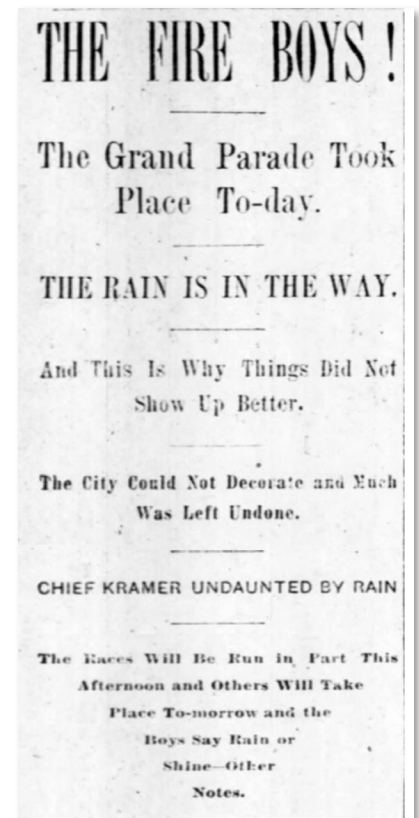
In August 1891, the annual conference and tournament of the North Carolina State Firefighters' Association was held in Durham. Among the attendees were fourteen members of Asheville's Rescue Hook and Ladder Company¹, who departed by train on Monday, August 24 at 2:15 p.m.

The conference opened on Tuesday, August 25, at 10:00 a.m., and with rain. Said the *Durham Daily Globe* that day, "the rain came and to day has not been a winner."

On Wednesday, August 26, a parade was held along with three tournament games.² The weather "was no better than the first day," said the *Durham Daily Globe* that day. The rain stopped for the hour that the parade was held, "but the business was very much dampened." Some 500 firemen were present for the event(s), reported one newspaper.

On Thursday, August 27, the remaining tournament games were held. Said that day's *Durham Daily Globe*, "this was a better day, for some reasons, but still rain threatened and kept away hundreds who would have attended."

On Wednesday night, eight of the Asheville firemen boarded a train to return home.³ They were leaving early⁴. The train departed at 7:10 p.m. It stopped briefly at Statesville at 2:26 a.m. the next morning. Some passengers departed, including two of the eight Asheville firemen. Eight minutes later, the train reached the Bostian Heights bridge where it derailed and plunged into a ravine.



Durham Daily Globe, August 26, 1891

¹ Reported the *Asheville Daily Citizen* on August 21, 1891, R. H. Lee had been "soliciting subscriptions to defray the expenses of the firemen on this trip." They added, "help the boys out."

² The parade included fire companies from Durham, Greensboro, Monroe, New Berne (sic), Raleigh, and Salisbury. *Durham Daily Globe*, August 26, 1891.

³ Robert H. Lee and his son Carlos were among other Asheville firemen not aboard the returning train. They were staying in Durham until Friday, "engaged in committee work for the convention." *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 27, 1891.

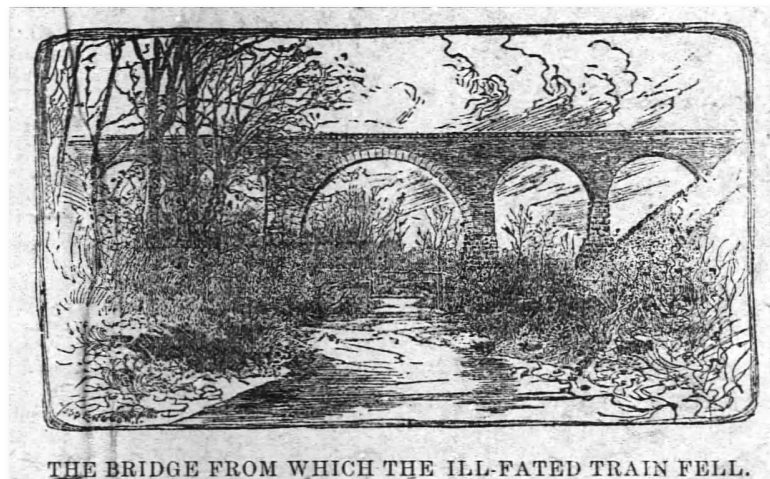
⁴ Why were they leaving early? Legeros had previously cited a reason of the tournament being impacted by that week's rain, but has been unable to find a citation of same. The tournament apparently continued and despite the reported rain.

The steam locomotive, tender, and five cars dropped 65 feet. Scores were injured and twenty-two people were killed⁵, including three of the Asheville firemen: brothers Charles D. Barnett and H. Perry Barnett, along with Samuel E. Gorman.⁶

The Accident

Western North Carolina Railroad Passenger Train No. 9, also known as the Fast Mail train, was assembled at Salisbury, where it departed on time at 1:00 a.m. on Thursday, August 27. It was comprised of a steam locomotive and tender, a baggage and mail car, a first-class coach, a second-class coach, the Pullman sleeper car “Saluda” from Goldsboro—which carried a “good number of passengers from northern points”—and the private car “Daisy” of railroad Superintendent R. R. Bridgers. The train carried 75 passengers.

The train was due at Statesville at 1:52 a.m. and arrived at 2:26 a.m. “It stopped for but a minute”⁷ and eight or ten passengers departed. Less than five minutes later, it started across the Bostian Heights viaduct, a high stone bridge spanning Third Creek. It left the tracks and the entire train plunged off the bridge, falling a distance of 60 feet⁸, “wrecking the whole train and carrying death and destruction with it.”⁹ It also carried away “every vestige of the track, rails, cars, ties, and all, leaving nothing but the smoke brick surface of the viaduct [...] intact.”¹⁰



Statesville *Landmark*, September 3, 1891

⁵ For many days, news accounts included detailed information about the victims, both those injured and who died. Reported the *Southern Argus* on August 27?, 1891, “Among those killed was Rev. J. M. Sykes, a graduate of the Southwestern Presbyterian University, Clarksville, Tenn. He had just been assigned to missionary work in China and was to have left for the country September 26 next. He was married.”

⁶ For years, Legeros incorrectly cited W. E. Winslow as among the dead firemen. He was not a member of the fire department.

⁷ Statesville *Landmark*, September 3, 1891.

⁸ The distance from the top of the tracks to the surface of the creek was measured as 60 feet and three inches. The distance from the eastern edge of the bridge abutment to where the sleeper car fell was measured at 153 feet and three inches in a direct line. Statesville *Landmark*, September 3, 1891.

⁹ *Southern Argus*, August 27?, 1891

¹⁰ Raleigh *News & Observer*, August 30, 1890.

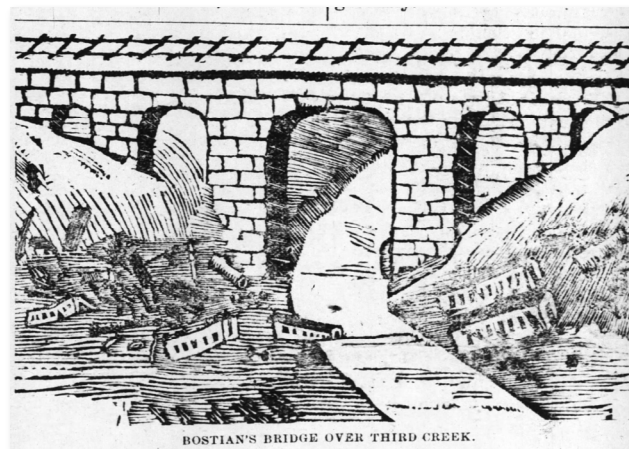
The engine was traveling at 25 to 30 miles per hour on the downgrade when it left the tracks on the east side of the bridge. The hurtling locomotive “cleared the chasm”¹¹ and struck the opposite bank, where it was partly buried in the ground, 20 feet from the side of the ravine. The first-class car landed upon the engine and was turned into a “splintered mass of the timbers.”¹² It rested on its right side, as did the other cars. Behind the coach car was the superintendent’s car, with the Pullman car partly underneath it. The Pullman car was described as “lying with one end in the creek and a portion of it burst open.”¹³

The creek was “swollen out of the banks”¹⁴ and the Pullman car touched the bottom. In one cabin in the forward end of the car, Mrs. Sue Poole and her daughter, Lewlen, from Williamston, were partly submerged. Though the mother made “superhuman exertions”¹⁵ to escape the flooding cabin, “she was compelled to release her hold”¹⁶ on her daughter. Lewlen held her mother’s head out of the water until her strength was exhausted and her mother drowned. The daughter was nearly underwater herself—the water having risen from her knees to her chin—when help arrived¹⁷ and she was rescued.

So great was the force of the collision, noted one newspaper, that the bodies of two women from the first cabin of the coach car were found but an arm’s length from the engineer’s body, in the cab of the locomotive. Continued the account, “the wreck of the train was complete,



Statesville Landmark, September 3, 1891



Hickory Press and Carolinian, September 3, 1891.

¹¹ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 28, 1891.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 29, 1891.

¹⁴ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 28, 1891.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Lewlen Poole was rescued as men were “cutting their way to her side.” They could see she was struggling, as they worked to reach her. Another passenger, Dr. George W. Sanderlin, was in the sleeping car at the time of the accident. When he regained consciousness, he found that his left leg was pinned, and he was in water up to his chin. Hearing someone call his name, he was helped by Bennehan Cameron, who freed him from the wreckage. *Asheville Democrat*, September 3, 1891.

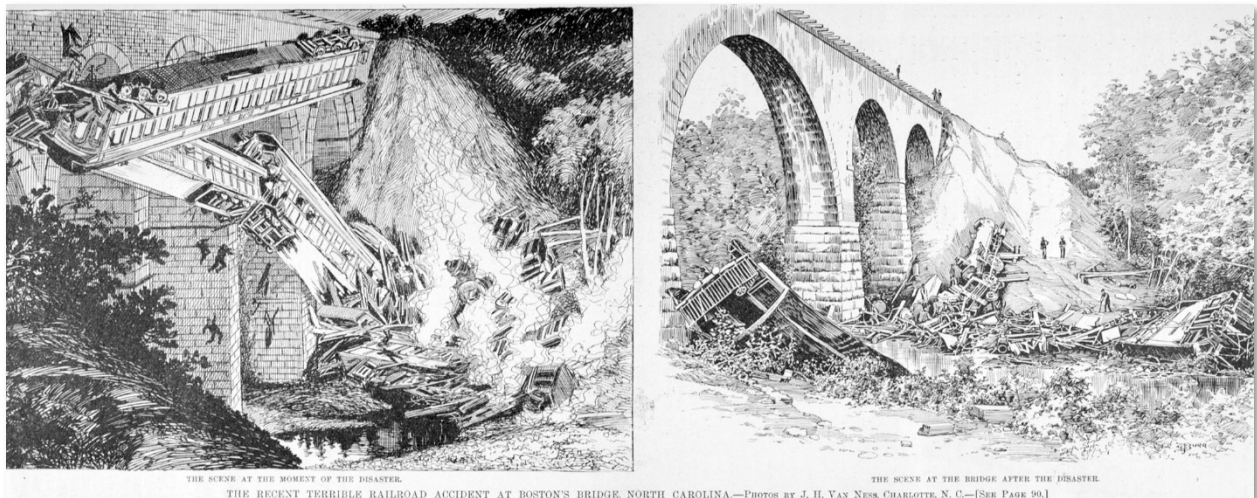
the engine's upper works were all torn off and the coaches only fit for kindling wood where they lay."¹⁸

People in town also said that they heard the crash. The bridge was located about a mile and a half from the center of town.¹⁹

Initial accounts varied in their reports of the victims. The *Raleigh News & Observer* said that 40 were killed, while the *Charlotte Observer* said that 30 had died. The *Statesville Landmark* reported that 20 passengers were killed "outright," nine were seriously injured, and some twenty were "badly bruised and shaken up."²⁰

Among those killed were the train's engineer and fireman, the baggage master, a Pullman porter, and numerous passengers, including the three members of the Asheville fire department.²¹

Some of the surviving passengers crawled from the cars and climbed to the top of the rail cars where they rested, perched and dazed as they were described. As rescuers arrived from town, "axes were put to work"²² and the cars were cut open. They pulled out as many passengers as could be found, some still alive. By dawn, "great crowds of people were on the ground and nothing was left undone."²³



Illustrations by J. H. Van Ness of Charlotte.

¹⁸ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 28, 1891.

¹⁹ The *Raleigh News & Observer* on August 30, 1891, printed this colorful description of the scene from a staff correspondent's report from August 28: "At the base of the viaduct lies a scene which may well blanch the bravest face and cause the stoniest heart to stand still—the remains of a grim and ghastly banquet served up to the monster death. Here is a veritable 'dead man's gulch,' a canyon of death. And this chaos of rubbish was a few hours ago a snorting, puffing, living, moving train of cars, freighted with human life. There was a horrible rumble, a rasping, tearing and grinding—then a plunge and awful crash, prolonged and horrifying and so tremendous in the vibrations that followed it that the concussion reached the ears of slumbering Statesville two miles away."

²⁰ *Raleigh News & Observer*, August 28, 1891.

²¹ Three crew members survived: Conductor _____ Spough—"badly bruised and cut, but had no bones broken"—Sleeping Car Conductor H. C. Clepper, with cuts on his head and a sprained arm and ankle, and Flagman _____ Shoaf, "hurt but will live" *Asheville Daily Citizen*: August 28, 1891.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

Twenty dead bodies²⁴ were brought to Statesville—three of whom had died after being removed from the train—where they were stored in the Farmer’s Tobacco Warehouse.²⁵ The injured were brought to hotels and private residences for care. Some of the bodies were later moved to Cooper’s Hotel, where their coffins were put in the parlor in preparation for sending them on trains to their respective families.

The cause of the accident was promptly reported as “spreading rails from rotten ties.”²⁶ The bridge was not damaged, however, and the rails were repaired early the following day, using “a large force of convicts from Newton.”²⁷ By 5:00 p.m. on Friday, August 28, trains were again passing over the bridge on temporary tracks.

The scene also drew spectators. Reported a newspaper on the second day, “tremendous crowds have been flocking to the wreck all day and hundreds of horses and vehicles of all kind are to be soon tied near the spot.”²⁸ Business in the town was “practically suspended”²⁹ as stores, banks, and offices “closed their doors in respect to the dead, and that the injured might be better cared for.”³⁰

Reported the Statesville *Landmark* on August 29, the local telegraph office was “besieged from early morning until midnight” with survivors sending telegrams to their friends “in all directions” and “telegrams of inquiry” pouring in “from every direction.” The newspaper itself also received “not less than forty dispatches, from newspapers and individuals, calling for tidings.”

In Asheville, no definite news was received by anyone until about noon, “when telegrams containing the horrible news began coming in.”³¹ About 1:00 p.m., the first “relief train”³² left for Statesville, followed by the regular 2:00 p.m. train, which was “crowded with Asheville people, friends, and relatives of those who were on the train.”³³

A coroner’s jury, or inquest, was conducted immediately. They determined that the accident was caused by a loose rail, and the rail had been loosened because the bolts and spikes had been removed.

AT ASHEVILLE.

**How the News Was Received—
The Known Dead.**

The following members of the Rescue hook and ladder company left Monday for the firemen’s convention at Durham: J. E. Gaze, M. H. Kelly, Chas. Barnett, Marshal Nix, H. J. Sarratt, A. Sturgis, John Slagle, Robt. H. Lee, Carlos Lee, S. E. Gorman, Gus Guischart, W. C. Bradford and W. W. Wood.

Part, at least, of these were on their way home on the ill-fated train.

Of this number Samuel L. Gorman, Charles Barnett and Perry Barnett are known to have been killed.

About four o’clock a special car left the depot in this city having on board Superintendent R. R. Bridgers and Master of Trains R. P. Foster, going to the scene of the calamity.

Robert H. Lee and son Carlos, were not on the train, Mr. Lee having written home that he would remain in Durham until Friday, engaged in committee work for the convention.

John Slagle and Gus Guischart were on the train with the other firemen, but left them at Statesville, expecting to come on a later train.

Charles Barnett, one of the dead firemen, was a native of Henderson county, but had been working at his trade of plasterer in Asheville for some time. He

Asheville Weekly Citizen, September 3, 1891

²⁴ By September 10, officials had accounted for 52 people on the train, 22 dead and 30 wounded. Statesville *Landmark*, September 10, 1891.

²⁵ Not all bodies were immediately identified. Reported the *Southern Argus* on August 27, 1891, one was a lady with a ring on her finger engraved with “T. H. W. to M. R. R.” She was believed to be the wife of T. H. White of Memphis, “who had been spending the summer at Hillsborough, N.C., and was on her way to Memphis.”

²⁶ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 28, 1891.

²⁷ *Raleigh News & Observer*, August 29, 1891. Added the Statesville *Landmark* on August 29, 1891, there was a “force of about 100 hands working actively” at the site on the day after the accident.

²⁸ Citation?

²⁹ Statesville *Landmark*, August 29, 1891.

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 27, 1891.

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

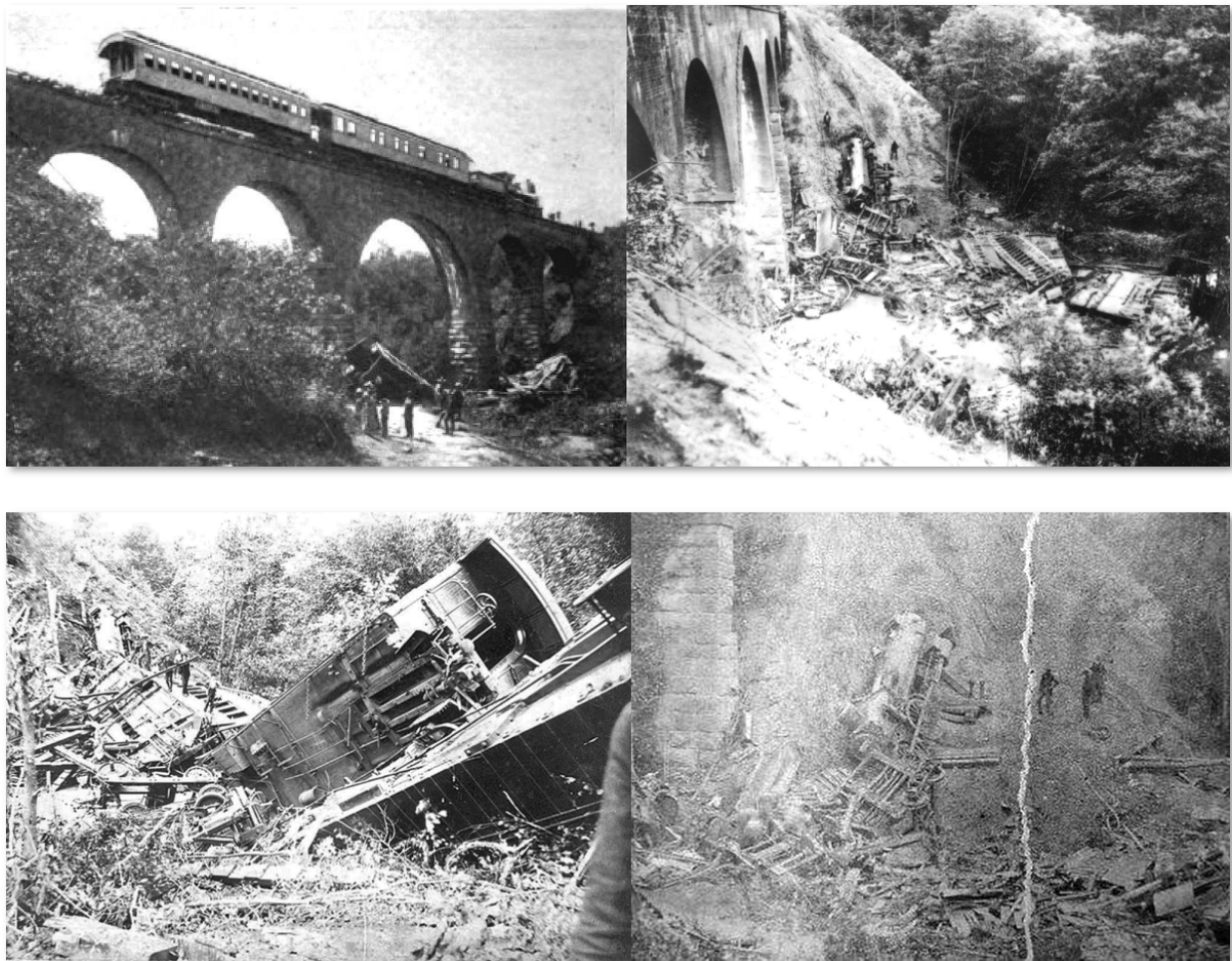
This had been done with tools belonging to the railroad company and that were stored in an open shed nearby.

They also found that several of the crossties at and near the site were “unsound” and should be replaced. They also concluded that the superstructure of the bridge “was in part defective and unsafe.” They also condemned the high speed that trains used when crossing the bridge.

The accident was the state’s deadliest rail disaster at the time. Today, it’s third deadliest, behind the 29 people killed in Hamlet in 1906, and the 74 people killed in Robeson County in 1943.

Most of the reporting of the accident was done by Joseph P. Caldwell, editor of the Statesville *Landmark*. He took notes at the scene and had a messenger take the information into town, to be later published in the newspaper.³⁴

Photos



³⁴ Other reports were brought to town by survivors, such as “George Bowley, traveling for the Atlanta Rubber Company.” He and one or two others “who made their way from the car alive” walked back to the town and reported the news of the accident. Statesville *Landmark*, August 27, 1891.

The Account of Marshall Nix

At the time of the accident, the six fire company members were riding in one of the coach cars: Charles Barnett and his brother Perry, Will Bradford, John Gaze, Samuel Gorman, and Marshall Nix.

Nix was sitting on the second seat on the right, by a half-open window, he later recounted. He had been partially asleep and had his arm on the windowsill. Gaze was in the third seat on the left side of the car. Gorman was on the first seat on the left side, asleep. Just behind him sat “Charley” Barnett. Bradford sat in the seat next to Gaze, asleep. Perry Barnett was on the third seat on the right.

The conductor had just taken the tickets in one car, recounted Nix, and was standing in the aisle near him, making a note in his book. Suddenly Nix felt “two distinct shocks, simultaneously”³⁵ and coming from what he thought were the crossties. Others also felt the shocks, he later learned.

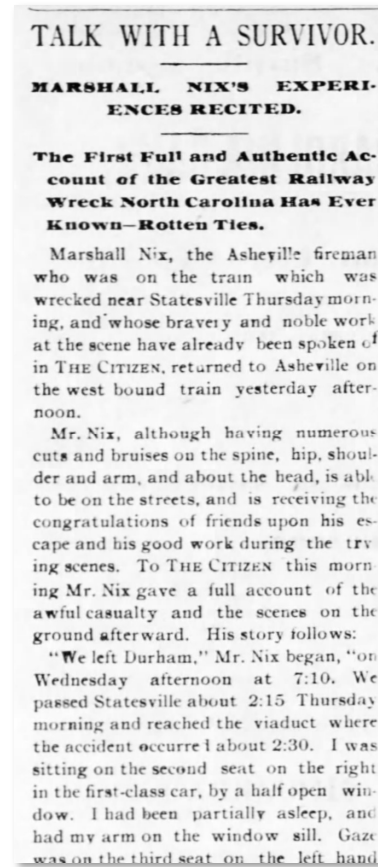
At that moment, the conductor reached up for the “danger signal.” As his hand raised to about the level of his head, Nix said, they felt the sensation of “going downward.”³⁶ In an instant, there was a crash and the loud noise of “exhausting steam and revolving wheels”³⁷ from the engine.

Nix was hurt, but he broke out a window and “climbed out of the pile of wreckage.”³⁸ For a short time, he said, the sound of the engine drowned everything out. Then he heard “the heart-rendering (sic) cries of the wounded.”³⁹

Unable to awaken anyone, the two returned to the accident site. “The cries there were increasing,”⁴⁰ he recounted. He also heard a cry from John Gaze, who was up on the track. He went to Gaze and they started back toward Statesville, to notify others.

Warning Other Trains

Standing on the tracks and above the ravine, Nix told Gaze that “I must go to Statesville to tell the dispatcher to warn all trains of the accident and avoid another disaster.”⁴¹ They crossed over the bridge and headed toward town. Gaze couldn’t keep up, so Nix ran ahead as fast as he could. About 300 yards from the scene was the “section house.”⁴² Nix stopped there and awoke the section master and told him “to put



Asheville Daily Citizen, August 29, 1891

³⁵ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 29, 1891.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

out red lights as a danger signal.”⁴³ The section master didn’t have any red lights, so Nix suggested that he put out several white lights. Nix continued to Statesville, running all the way. He found the dispatcher and told him about the accident.

The dispatcher was skeptical at first, and then sent messages to Salisbury and Catawba, telling them to hold all trains. He also sent a message “up town”⁴⁴ for help. The dispatcher received a response that a “wreckers’ train from Newton”⁴⁵ would leave in a few minutes. About that time, Gaze joined Nix. Then, Gaze sent “a runner up town”⁴⁶ to notify Dr. Adams of the accident. Nix and Gaze met the doctor⁴⁷ in a buggy, and they went looking for more help.

After notifying the dispatcher, Nix found and awoke John Goodlake of Asheville and Gus Guischard, the fire company member who had stopped off at Statesville. Goodlake immediately sent a dispatch to the Asheville mayor, informing him of the accident. The three then joined Gaze and others from the town, returning to the scene, to help.

Returning to the Scene

Dawn was breaking as Nix returned to the site. He went down into the ravine and found Will Bradford lying under a piece of timber. Bradford said he had lain there since after the accident, and had seen Nix and Gaze pass over the bridge, on their way to Statesville. Nix then helped the Pullman conductor out of the ravine and to the farmhouse of Mr. Bostian.

He also recounted that the Barnett brothers had been found dead, lying “face downward.”⁴⁸ Nearby, the baggage master laid gasping and died a few minutes later. Samuel Gorman had died before help could reach him and was last heard calling for water. Recounted the *Asheville Daily Citizen*, “Mr. Nix told his story in a feeling way, but without any attempt at giving himself any credit for what he has done since the wreck occurred.”⁴⁹

Nix along with firemen J. P. Goodlake and Gus Guischard had “been working like Turks,”⁵⁰ said the *Asheville Daily Citizen* and they were “spoken of in terms of the highest praise.”⁵¹ The paper also praised the people of Statesville for their “heroic work”⁵² and identified several individuals who had been “most active.”⁵³

Later in town, Nix purchased a suit, as he had lost all his clothing. He went to the police chief, who was guarding the bodies, and was given all of the articles found on the three dead Asheville firemen. He

⁴³ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 29, 1891.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Reported the Statesville *Landmark* on August 29, 1891, all the local physicians were enlisted to help the victims, along with doctors John Whitehead of Salisbury and R. B. Baker of Hickory.

⁴⁸ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 29, 1891.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Is the phrase “working like Turks” considered a slur today?

⁵¹ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 29, 1891.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*

would later turn them over to “the proper persons.”⁵⁴ Those items included Charles Barnett’s purse, which contained \$3.83, as well as his watch and golf scarf pin, and ten cents found on Mr. Gorman.

The fireman’s hat worn by Charles Barnett and carried on his belt was not found, nor “not a mark could be seen of it having passed through the wreck.”⁵⁵ Nix also said that claims of the bodies being robbed was “groundless,”⁵⁶ but several men were arrested for “stealing goods from the cars.”⁵⁷

When News Reached Durham

News of the deaths of the Asheville firemen did not reach Durham until 2:00 p.m. on Thursday and just as the remaining fire companies were starting one of the tournament games. “Everything was suspended and a special meeting of the convention was called to pass resolutions on the death of the firemen.”⁵⁸

The resolution, created by a committee of W. F. Randolph, E. G. Parmelee, and J. D. McNeill, read:

“Whereas, It has pleased Almighty God in His inscrutable providence to remove from our midst so suddenly, on August 27, 1891, whilst returning home from a meeting of the Association, held in Durham, our esteemed associates, Chas. D. Barnett, Wm. Barnett⁵⁹, and Sam’l Gorman, members of the Rescue Hook and Ladder Co., of Asheville, therefore, be it

“Resolved, That this Convention pause in the midst of its deliberations to place upon record appropriate expression of the loss that this Association sustained in the death of those sterling firemen, who, at all times, were ready and willing to do anything for the good of their brothers throughout the State, and who were equally distinguished for their sterling qualities as men and firemen, and whose memory will be cherished by all as most worthy to be kept green.

“To the families of our valued associations, we extended our warmest sympathy in their bereavement.”⁶⁰

The *Durham Daily Globe* that day printed the following account, with what information was known at the time:⁶¹

⁵⁴ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 29, 1891.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

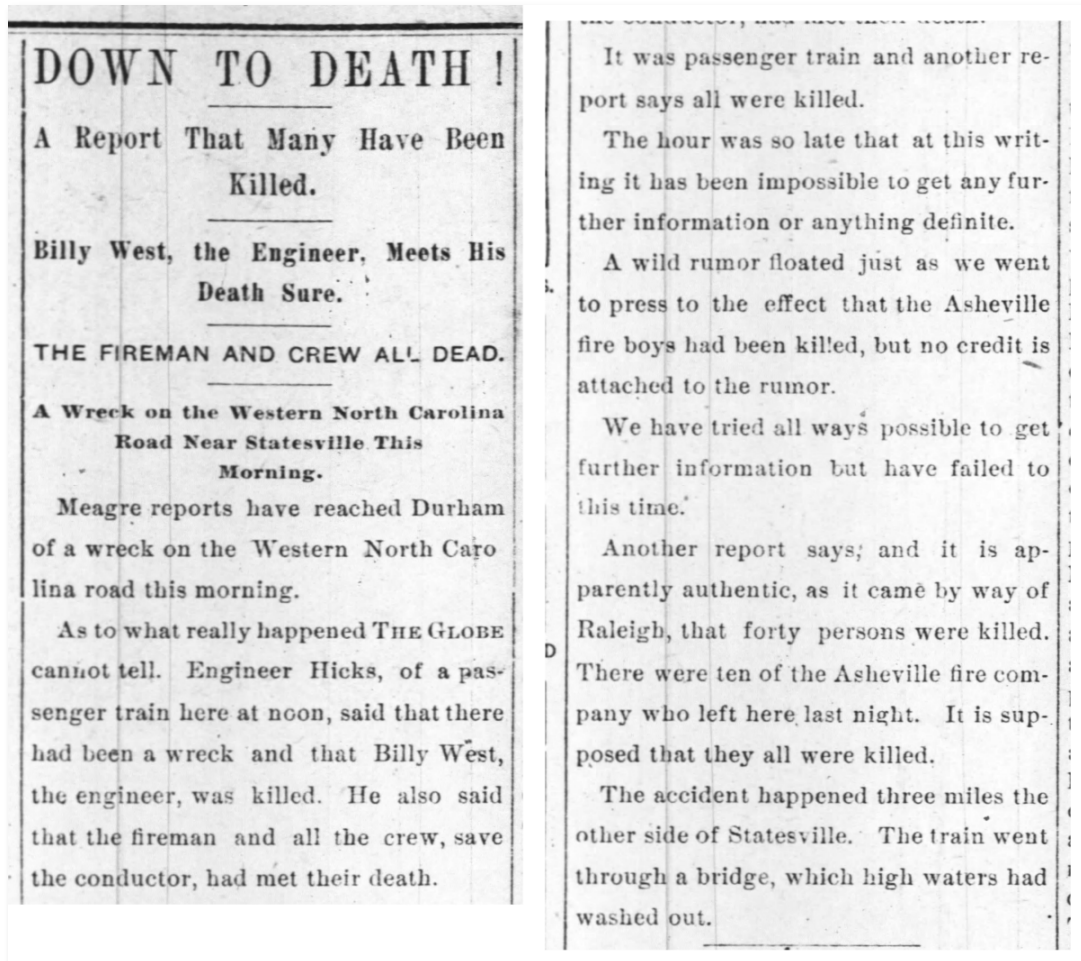
⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Citation?

⁵⁹ Perry Barnett’s name was misspelled in the resolution. His first name was Henry not William.

⁶⁰ *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Convention and Tournament of the North Carolina State Firemen’s Association Held in Asheville, N.C. – July 13th, 14th, and 15th, 1892.*

⁶¹ Among the early inaccurate reports was that the bridge had been washed out by high waters.



The Firefighters

Six members of the Asheville Fire Department were aboard the train at the time of the accident:

- Killed Charles D. Barnett
- Killed Henry Perry "Perry" Barnett Jr., brother of Charles
- Killed Samuel L. Gorman⁶²
- Injured Will Bradford
- Injured John Gaze
- Injured Marshall Nix⁶³.

Two other firemen, John Slagle and Gus Guischart had been aboard, but left the train at Statesville. They had planned to take a later train.

⁶² Gorman's full name was either Samuel L. Gorman or Samuel Ellsworth Gorman. The middle initial L. is cited in Buncombe County probate records, via Ancestry.com. The middle name Ellsworth is cited in genealogical research in the Wessel Family Tree, via Ancestry.com.

⁶³ Marshall Nix's full name may be Marshall John "John" Nix. Statesville *Landmark*, September 3, 1891.

The Deceased Firemen

The bodies of the three deceased firemen were embalmed by morticians from Charlotte and Durham. They were returned to Asheville on a train on Friday, August 28.⁶⁴

Charles D. Barnett, 24, was a plasterer by trade and secretary of the Rescue Hook and Ladder Company. A native of Henderson County who worked in Asheville for some time, he left behind a wife and son. His brother Perry Barnett, 21, also worked as a plasterer. He was unmarried.

Samuel Gorman, 27, worked for the plumbing company J. C. Brown & Co. in Asheville. He was a native of Vermont and had come to Asheville from Washington D.C. about a year ago. He had a wife and two children, who were in Washington.

The train carrying their bodies was initially expected to arrive in Asheville on the night of Thursday, August 27. The streets were crowded with people talking about the accident and awaiting news of those they thought were aboard the train. At 9:00 p.m., the fire alarm bell rang with seven taps, the signal for a meeting call. Members of the fire companies “gathered at the square”⁶⁵ and boarded a streetcar to the railroad depot. They were followed by “several carloads of anxious people.”⁶⁶ When the train arrived, they learned that none of the bodies had been sent home.

The next morning, Friday, August 28, the fire bell tolled at 5:00 a.m. and “the fire boys, led by Chief Sawyer, took a car and went to the depot to meet the train.”⁶⁷ The train arrived shortly after 7:00 a.m. Cases carrying the Barnett boys “were tenderly borne by their comrades to the ladies’ waiting room and met by the father of the lads.”⁶⁸ The father had decided to take their bodies to Hendersonville as soon as possible and left with them on the 11:30 a.m. train. Accompanying the bodies with the father were M. H. Kelly and Alonzo Sturgis, representing the Asheville firemen.

The Barnetts were buried at Mud Creek Baptist Church Cemetery in Flat Rock, Henderson County.⁶⁹

Gorman’s body was taken to Blair & Brown morticians for re-embalming, and to Washington, D.C., the next day, accompanied by firemen R. H. Lee and Gus Guischard. Members of the fire companies, led by “Hull’s band,”⁷⁰ planned to escort Gorman’s body to the depot. He was buried in Washington, D.C.⁷¹

The Injured Firemen

Nix and Gaze returned to Asheville by train on Friday, August 28. Nix had “numerous cuts and bruises on the spine, hip, shoulder and arm, and about the head”⁷² but was “able to be on the streets.”⁷³ Gaze was

⁶⁴ Reported the *Raleigh News & Observer* on August 28, 1891, about the bodies being returned to their homes, “the first sight which greets the eye of the visitor as he steps from the train at the depot is a row of long white pine boxes, which contain all that is left of the victims of yesterday morning’s horror, and which are waiting to be borne away to grief stricken homes and bereaved loved ones.”

⁶⁵ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 28, 1891.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ www.findagrave.com/memorial/98783363/charles-d-barnett

⁷⁰ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 28, 1891.

⁷¹ Washington, D.C., The Select Deaths and Burials Index, 1769-1960, and other genealogical information via Ancestry.com.

⁷² *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 28, 1891.

⁷³ *ibid.*

initially described as the most seriously injured of the three firemen, but later reported as “considerably shaken up by not dangerously hurt.”⁷⁴

Bradford was more seriously injured and remained in Statesville until September 1, when he returned to Asheville by train on that date. He was taken to the home of his brother on Central Avenue. He suffered from three fractured ribs and a broken collarbone, along with various severe bruises on his body.

After news of the accident reached Asheville, hose company captain H. C. Fagg travelled to Statesville to look after the injured firemen and render “every possible assistance.”⁷⁵ He returned to Asheville on September 28.

Distribution of Deaths and Injuries

On September 10, 1891, the Statesville *Landmark* reported that Captain P. C. Carlton had been “keeping a correct list of the killed and wounded” and had created an “interesting table showing the distribution”:

Second-class car	9 passengers	6 killed	3 wounded
First-class car	27	11	16
Pullman sleeper	12	3	9
Superintendent’s car	2	0	2

The article added an account of an injured passenger who had not been reported in any paper, G. L. P. Caruth of Landrum, SC. He was in a hospital in Salisbury with broken ribs and a broken left collarbone. They noted some other corrections but said that list stood as before, with 52 people accounted for on the train, with 22 dead and 30 wounded.⁷⁶

Miscellany

On September 10, 1891, the Statesville *Landmark* reported that trains were now travelling over the bridge at the lower speed of about fifteen miles an hour. “It is stated that one or two of the engineers on the road have lost their nerve since the accident.”

On September 23, 1891, the *Asheville Daily Citizen* reported that on Saturday the remains of the destroyed railroad cars were burned. People who were nearby said “at time[s] there was a strong and unpleasant odor of decaying flesh, but probably their imagination was mainly responsible for this.”

On October 1, 1891, the *Wilmington Messenger* ran this notice from the Office of the General Manager of the Richmond & Danville Railroad Company, in Atlanta, GA, and dated September 1, 1891: “Reward. This company will pay \$10,000 for the arrest and conviction of the person, or persons, who removed the rail from the track of the Western North Carolina railroad, near Bostian’s Bridge, Iredell County, North Carolina, on the night of Wednesday, August 26, 1891.” It was signed W. H. Green, General Manager.

On October 15, 1891, the *Asheville Weekly Citizen* printed this story: “How About This? Another Attempt to Wreck the Train at Bostian’s Bridge – Statesville, N.C., Oct. 10 – Another alleged attempt was made

⁷⁴ *Asheville Daily Citizen*, August 28, 1891.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Reported the *Asheville Daily Citizen* on August 28, 1891, the heavy rains had “swollen the creek” at the accident site and made rescue and recovery work difficult. It added that no new bodies had been found that day, and “if any remain in the wreck it is probably that they are at the bottom and probably washed down the creek.”

this morning to wreck the passenger train at Bostian (sic) bridge, the same place that the fearful wreck occurred some thirty days ago. The engineer happened to see a pile of rails across the track, luckily stopping the train, where the obstruction was removed. It is further said that the man who tried to wreck this train was arrested and placed in jail.”

The story was followed by a second one: “Another Account. The man arrested here was not much in earnest. It is supposed to be some trick of railroad detectives. The train was stopped by rails on the track, but an investigation will show something which may be called ‘funny work’. It is suggested that such attempts do not often happen in daylight. – Special dispatch to the Durham Daily Globe.”

On October 24, 1891, the *Orange County Observer* reported that the *Salisbury Herald* reported that Mrs. A. L. Sink of Lexington was out for the first time since her serious injury in the accident. She was one of the most severely injured passengers and was improving fast. She would soon be “entirely well and will not be so badly disfigured as was feared from the nature of her wounds.” Since returning to Lexington, she had seven splinters removed from her face and neck, one of which was two-and-a-half inches in length and another was over an inch long.

On November 5, 1891, the Concord *Standard* reported that the Statesville *Landmark* said that lawsuits originating from the accident have been brought against the Richmond & Danville Railroad Company, Western North Carolina Division, in Iredell County Superior Court, by the following individuals: G. W. Bosley, for injuries; O. W. Lawson, for injuries; O. W. Lawson, for lost baggage; J. B. Armfield, administrator of J. C. Brodie, deceased, death claim.

On November 26, 1891, the Concord *Standard* reported that Elmore Cloninger was released from custody, after a grand jury failed to “find a bill ” against him for causing the accident. He was arrested in late September and charged with “wrecking the train”. His arrest originated from his time in a Newton jail and his remarks to a fellow prisoner. The other prisoner was under indictment for attempting to “wreck a construction train on the Narrow Gauge,” reported the Statesville *Landmark* on October 1, 1891. They added that “it was said that Cloninger would prove an alibi” though the main witnesses “are the prisoners who are in jail for crime.”

Confessed to the Crime

Nearly six years later, the *Smithfield Herald* on August 19, 1897, reprinted this story from the *Statesville Mascot*, published that week:

“Monday the grand jury returned a true bill against J. A. Hand and Bird Shephard for the murder of Hugh K. Leinster (sic). It will be recalled that Mr. Leinster was one of the victims of that awful wreck that occurred at Bostian’s bridge in August 1891. It seems that two white convicts now on the State farms—J. A. Hand, who was sent from this county, and Bird Shephard, who went up from Caldwell county—confessed to some fellow convicts that they wrecked the train at Bostian’s bridge, and told them where they could find some of the money concealed, as their time expired before Hand’s and Shephard’s. These confidants gave the matter away and two witnesses from Kinston, Lenoir County, together with Mr. R. B. Leinster, were examined by the grand jury at this term. The grand jury found a true bill against them as above stated. They will be tried for the murder of Mr. Leinster, as he was a resident of this county, and his death in the wreck easily proven here. – Salisbury World.

About the Bridge

The Bostian Heights Bridge—also called Bostian’s Bridge and Bostian Bridge—was erected in 1857 and consisted of five spans. The *Asheville Daily Citizen* on August 28, 1891, printed this description of the structure:

“There is much confusion in the public mind as to the nature of the cross over the creek where the recent calamitous accident occurred, some speaking of it as a high trestle, some as a wooden bridge, some as a stone viaduct. It is neither one nor the other, but a well-constructed arch of brick, stone being used in the spring of the arch, and in the key stone, all other parts being brick. The creek is a small one, rising at the base of Bushy Mountain, flowing southeast, crossing the railroad two miles west of Statesville; then turning east and then northeast, crossing the road at Cleveland where it is known as Third Creek, and thence it flows into the Yadkin. It flows much of its course through deep banks, and its crossings are high above the water.

“The crossing at which the accident occurred is one of the very few properly constructed bridges, apart from iron structures, on this or other Southern road. In the section between Old Fort and Round Knob, there are two solidly and elegantly built single-arch granite bridges, or viaducts, and these are the exceptions.”

The Ghost Train Legend and a Fatal Accident 111 Years Later

On the first anniversary of the accident, said slightly varying accounts, the ghost of a uniformed railway employee with a gold watch was seen at the site. Over time, a legend grew that on the anniversary of the accident, the squealing of wheels and screams of passengers could still be heard, along with the ghost of Baggage Master Hugh K. Leinster, whose body was found with a broken neck in the wreckage.

On August 27, 1941, a woman from Columbia, SC, said she saw a train derail as it crossed the bridge. After it crashed into the creek below, she saw victims swimming in the creek. She even said she had a conversation with the train’s baggage master. Returning with her husband, moments later, there was nothing there. Only later did she learn that this happened on the 50th anniversary of the accident and to the hour.⁷⁷

On the 100th anniversary of the accident on August 27, 1991, hundreds of people camped in the field just below the bridge, hoping to see the legendary ghost train. Most of the 400 people were from Iredell County, but some had come from as far away as Ohio. Reported the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, “they carried sleeping bags, quilts, lawn chairs, coolers and flashlights.” Many drove their vehicles right onto the field, which had been mowed by its owner, E. L. Allison. He also erected a hand-painted sign reading “Welcome Bostian Bridge Train Wreck Spectators.” As midnight approached, “the crowd numbered about 75 people.” But the only train that they saw that night was a westbound freight that “rumbled through” at 12:07 a.m. Added the newspaper, “a few spectators applauded.”

On the 119th anniversary of the accident on August 27, 2010, at about 2:45 a.m., about a dozen amateur ghost hunters were trespassing on the bridge when a train approached. Three Norfolk Southern locomotives and one car rounded a bend in the tracks and surprised the group. They were about 150 feet from safety when they saw the train, said a sheriff’s department official in later news reports. One person was

⁷⁷ *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 28, 1991.

struck and killed, a 29-year-old male from Charlotte. Two others were injured, including a woman who was airlifted from the scene. Reported the Charlotte Observer on August 30, the young man who died told his girlfriend “I love you” before pushing her to safety just as the train struck him. She fell 30 to 40 feet into the ravine. She was later airlifted to Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte.

Newspaper Stories

Asheville Citizen-Times, August 28, 1991, Hundreds gather to mark 100th anniversary of ‘ghost’ train wreck.

Asheville Daily Citizen, August 21, 1891, news brief about fire company members going to Durham.

Asheville Daily Citizen, August 22 1891, news brief about fire company members going to Durham.

Asheville Daily Citizen, August 27, 1891, second edition, Awful! A Sorrow to Asheville Homes! Terribly Fatal Railway Wreck, etc.

Asheville Daily Citizen, August 28, 1891, The Dead Brought Back, Remains of Asheville’s Firemen Sent Home, etc.

Asheville Daily Citizen, August 29, 1891, Talk with a Survivor, Marshall Nix’s Experiences Recited, etc.

Asheville Weekly Citizen, September 3, 1891, At Asheville, How the News was Received – The Known Dead.

Asheville Daily Citizen, September 2, 1891, news item about Will C. Bradford returned to Asheville.

Asheville Daily Citizen, September 23, 1891, news item about burning the wrecked rail cars.

Asheville Democrat, September 3, 1891, A Plunge To Death! A Wreck on the W.N.C.R.R., Frightful Loss of Life

Asheville Weekly Citizen, September 3, 1891, Latest From The Wreck, A Corrected List of Dead and Injured, etc.

Asheville Weekly Citizen, October 15, 1891, How About This? Another Attempt to Wreck the Train at Bostian’s Bridge.

Charlotte Democrat, September 4, 1891, A Frightful Railroad Accident.

Charlotte Observer, August 28, 1891, Hurlled to Death, A Train on the W.N.C. Railroad Meets with a Frightful Accident, etc.

Charlotte Observer, August 30, 2010, Family: Man killed by train saved girlfriend.

CNN, August 28, 2010, ‘Ghost train’ hunter killed by train in North Carolina.

Durham Daily Globe, August 24, 1891, Of the Tournay, The Programme as it Has Been Given, etc.

Durham Daily Globe, August 25, 1891, The Fire Boys! Some Are Here, Others Are Coming; The Rain is in the Way, etc.

Durham Daily Globe, August 26, 1891, The Fire Boys! The Grand Parade Took Place To-day; The Rain is in the Way, etc.

Durham Daily Globe, August 27, 1891, Down to Death! A Report That Many Have Been Killed, Billy West, the Engineer, Meets His Death Sure, etc.

Durham Daily Globe, August 27, 1891, The Tourney Ends! To-night and the End of the Play is Over, etc.

Durham Daily Globe, August 28, 1891, As to the Wreck! Details of the Wreck Yesterday Near Statesville, What Was Rumored and Printed Here Proved True, etc.

Landmark (Statesville), August 27, 1891, A Frightful Accident, Twenty-Five People Killed.

Landmark (Statesville), August 29, 1891, extra edition, A Frightful Accident, etc.

Landmark (Statesville), August 31, 1891, extra edition, Latest News of The Great Wreck, The Coroner's Jury, etc.

Landmark (Statesville), September 3, 1891, The Story of The Wreck, The Disaster of Disasters, Twenty-Two Killed, Thirty Wounded, etc.

Landmark (Statesville), September 10, 1891, The Great Disaster, The Narrative of the Wreck.

Landmark (Statesville), October 10, 1891, Arrest of a Supposed Wrecker – The Newton Fair, &c.

News & Observer (Raleigh), August 28, 1891, Forty Killed, The Fated Train Dashed to Splinters, etc.

News & Observer (Raleigh), August 29, 1891, Further Details, The Railroad Disaster at Statesville, etc.

News & Observer (Raleigh), August 30, 1891, At Bostian's Bridge, A Photograph of the Scenes at the Wreck, etc.

News & Observer, September 1, 1891, A Miscreant's Work, So Says the Coroner's Jury at Statesville, etc.

Orange County Observer, October 24, 1891, News item about injured victim.

Press and Carolinian (Hickory), September 3, 1891, Aroused, From Sleep to Death, Twenty-Four Killed, Twenty-Six Wounded, etc.

Reidsville Review, September 4, 1891, The Statesville Horror, A Train Falls 65 Feet – Twenty-Two Were Killed – Benny Smith's Experience.

Smithfield Herald, August 19, 1897, Bostian Bridge Wreckers.

Southern Argus, August 27?, 1891, Still Another, Awful Accident on a North Carolina Railroad.

Standard (Concord), November 5, 1891, Suits Against the Railroad.

Standard (Concord), November 26, 1891, News item about release of suspect in accident.

State Chronicle (Raleigh), September 12, 1981, Echoes From The Wreck, Another Theory – Distribution of Killed and Wounded – The Wounded Getting Away

Statesville Record & Landmark, March 13, 2019, New photo of Bostian Bridge disaster surfaces.

Statesville Record & Landmark, August 26, 2021, 130 years later, The Bostian Bridge train wreck hasn't been forgotten.

Wilmington Messenger, October 1, 1891, advertisement for Richmond & Danville Railroad Company.

Other Sources

Legeros research notes, North Carolina Deadliest Disasters, <http://legeros.com/history/nc/disasters.shtml>

NCPedia, Bostian Bridge Train Wreck, <https://www.ncpedia.org/bostian-bridge-train-wreck>

Wikipedia, Railway accident on the Bostian Bridge,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Railway_accident_on_the_Bostian_Bridge