

# Conductor's Watch Slow, 14 Die

First news photograph of train wreck taken in America recalls collision a century ago near Valley Falls station

The first news photograph of a train wreck ever taken in America was a daguerreotype of a collision which occurred 100 years ago three-quarters of a mile south of the station at Valley Falls, R.I., between trains of the Providence & Worcester Railroad. Fourteen people were killed and 22 injured.

Before the wreckage had been cleared away, a certain L. Wright of Pawtucket took a picture which was included in an exhibit of news photography arranged in the George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y., in connection with the recent News Photo conference attended by newspaper and magazine editors, photographers and technicians in charge of picture reproduction; and made available to *The Rhode Islander* by Eastman House.

The original daguerreotype is in the col-

lection of Mrs. Zelda Mackay, 2083 16th Ave., San Francisco, Calif.

Although the goal of printing photographs in the same press with type was not attained until the 1880's with the invention of the halftone plate, news photographs were taken as early as 1842 and used as models for wood engravings published in illustrated weeklies. An engraving of the Valley Falls wreck was published in *The Illustrated News* of New York, issue of Aug. 27, 1853.

Reproduction of a photograph then involved three types of illustrator: The daguerreotypist who took the picture, the artist who made a drawing from the print, and the engraver.

Of "L. Wright of Pawtucket" no other information is available.

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

**T**HE immediate cause of the wreck on the Providence & Worcester Railroad was a borrowed watch. Frederick W. Putnam, conductor of the Uxbridge-Providence down train on the morning of Aug. 12, 1853, wasn't a regular conductor, he was a brakeman employed as a conductor at a brakeman's pay, \$30 a month. The Providence & Worcester expected its employees to provide their own timepieces and Fred simply wasn't able to buy himself a good watch on that kind of money, so all during the two weeks he had been acting as conductor Fred had been running his trains on borrowed time—both literally and figuratively—and using a watch loaned him by a friendly milkman. Invariably he brought them in late, for the milkman's watch was consistently two minutes slow. Nevertheless, he trusted it.

The Uxbridge down train was one of the most difficult trains to run that the Providence & Worcester had. It left Uxbridge at 6:30 a.m. and was due at the "Boston switch," three-quarters of a mile below Valley Falls, at 7:29. There it was supposed to pass the up train leaving Providence at 7:20 and if the Uxbridge train was not there on time, the rule was that the up train was to wait five minutes before passing the switch, after which it was entitled to the track and the down train was supposed to keep out of its way. If the Uxbridge train was so late that it was apparent to the conductor that he couldn't reach the Boston switch before 7:34, he was supposed to stop at the Valley Falls station, or some place above it, until the train from Providence came up.



TODAY. Blackstone underpass of old Providence-Worcester line, collision scene 100 years ago.

More than 10 minutes the up train could not wait, for the morning train to Boston was coming right behind it.

It was a very tight schedule, one that crowded three trains toward the Boston switch within a few minutes. A bad curve north of the switch hid the single-tracked three-quarters of a mile between it and the Valley Falls station from view of the signalman at the junction point.

On the night of Aug. 11, Putnam set the milkman's watch by the company's time in the Providence station, which was then on the south side of the Great Cove, where the Mall is now. The down train left Whitinsville, above Uxbridge, the following morning at 6:25, Putnam's and the milkman's time. It was a train of eight coaches and the Whitinsville and Uxbridge people on it were most of them excursionists bound for a sail down Narragansett Bay. Fate or something also put aboard it Mr. Nathan Stevens, transportation master of the line. He had been up to Woonsocket, visiting his wife.

All along the line, the down train kept picking up passengers, and probably losing a little time itself. It pulled into Valley Falls at 7:32, Putnam's time. Actually it was about 7:34. The station agent, Jonathan Chase, saw Transportation Master Nate Stevens standing on the platform of one of the coaches and said to him, "You're late." So the Uxbridge train was—five minutes late for its nod to the up train at the Boston switch.

But young Mr. Putnam, knowing that the up train from Providence had orders to wait five minutes for him, figured he had time to make it. He had had a slight argument on the train with a passenger, a nervous Woonsocket man named Henry Riedel, who told him his watch was two minutes slow.

Clark Simmons, a Valley Falls man at the station, saw Putnam look at his watch and go up to the engineer, Ephraim Gates, and speak to him. Owen Smith, another station loafer, heard him ask Gates if he could reach the Boston switch in four minutes, saying that was all the time he had. And the nervous Mr. Riedel saw him hold up four fingers.

The up train from Providence left the station there at 7:22. It was scheduled to leave at 7:20 but there was a delay caused by a considerable amount of baggage from Newport that had to be put aboard. It reached the Boston switch at 7:34 and Ed Greene, the engineer, and his fireman, Fred Arnold, went over to a nearby well to get a drink. At 7:37, just as they finished cutting the coal dust, the signalman on the other side of the track raised the black ball. The up train got under way and off the Boston switch at 7:38.

The morning glory stack of the up train's engine obscured Ed Greene's vision. Fred Arnold saw the Uxbridge train before he did. "Greene, they're coming!" he yelled. Then he set the brakes and jumped and so did Ed. So, a couple of cars back, did Isaac H. Southwick, superintendent of the road. Rolling down the bank, he suffered injuries to his head, face and shoulders. He also broke his watch, probably a much better one than any conductor on the line carried. Mr. Taft, the president of the Providence & Worcester, also jumped. He was uninjured.

The two trains met head on just above the curve. The collision wrecked both engines. The first coach of the Uxbridge train was smashed to flinders and chips, the second coach was telescoped by the third. The dead were the Rev. Samuel Penny of Manville, Thomas Brown, a Mr. Chalesworth, William Fullerlove, Mrs. George Plant and Peter Plant, and Moses Bolton, all of Whitinsville; also John K. Perkins of Uxbridge, the fireman; Peter Rogers and his brother, and William W. Wood, of Milford; Mrs. Caroline Richmond, of Southbridge; Mrs. S. S. Mallory of Central Falls, and "an Irishman, name unknown."

A Mr. Goldthwaite had his arm severed at the shoulder. A five-year-old boy's arm was torn off. Engineer Ed Greene was scalded and burned and suffered broken ribs. Martin V. Jefferson, a brakeman on the down train, got a broken leg.

Samuel Fessenden, a passenger in the first coach, saw the up train come round the curve a-booming. He put his hands on the tops of two adjoining seats and raised his feet from the floor. Buried under a pile-up of fellow-passengers, he wriggled free and threw himself through the car window. An instant before the collision he saw Fred Putnam on the platform, working frantically at the brakes. Mr. Putnam jumped just in time. So did Mr. Riedel, the passenger who had disputed the correctness of the milkman's watch. As they picked themselves up Mr. Putnam said to the nervous man from Woonsocket, "Riedel, I am right." He appeared, Mr. Riedel said, "a good deal agitated." A minute or two later, the conductor of the up train, Perry G. Cord, came running up through the smoke and confusion crying "Putnam, what does this mean?" Putnam said, "I am running on my own time." Then he added, "I have a watch that is right." Putnam and Cord compared watches. Putnam's was a minute and a half slower than Cord's.

A coroner's jury—the foreman was George L. Dana—sat four days in Public Hall, Valley Falls, facing 14 cof-





FIRST PHOTO COVERAGE of a railroad wreck in this country was above print of daguerreotype taken by L. Wright, Pawtucket, of Providence & Worcester RR collision Aug. 12, 1853, south

of Valley Falls station. From it, staff artist of New York Illustrated News made engraving (below), using contemporary sketches as additional material for graphic picture of tragic crack-up.



finer corpses. Its verdict was that the immediate cause of the collision was Putnam's culpable carelessness, inexperience and want of judgment, that he should have provided himself with a suitable and correct timepiece. It also blamed the managers of the road for placing a young and inexperienced man in charge of the Uxbridge train and for not knowing that he was running his trains late on a bum watch.

The up train, according to the jury's findings, should have started from the Boston switch the instant the signal was given. If it had, it would have rounded the curve before the down train left the Valley Falls station. The junction signal should be located where the track was fully visible. And there was no necessity for crowding so many trains over the Boston switch so close to each other's time.

The Providence Journal praised the coroner's jury editorially for its verdict. It also said that the basic cause of the disaster was false economy and that no man fit to conduct even a cattle train could be had for the salary paid Mr. Putnam. Who was dismissed. By the board of directors. So were the engineer and fireman of the up train. But Mr. Putnam was also arrested for manslaughter. He couldn't have picked a worse day to run a train by a milkman's watch. Nathan Stevens, the transportation master, got fired, too. His crime was being on the Uxbridge train that morning.