

On February 21, 1901 Daniel Weeast (son of John and Sarah Weeast) and his best friend were heading south from Trenton to their homes in Florence on board the Nellie Bly train when it collided with another freight train heading north. The following article details the events leading up to that event and its aftermath.

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### **The Crash of the Nellie Bly**

It took 80 days for Phineas Fogg to travel around the world in Jules Verne's 1873 novel, but in 1889 it took 21-year-old Elizabeth Cochran just 72.

Elizabeth was better known by her pen name, Nellie Bly. Nellie Bly was a famous (real life) reporter working for the New York World newspaper. "Nellie focused her attention on women's rights issues, was the inventor of investigative reporting and became an expert at undercover work."

When Nellie returned from her trip around the world, "she was immediately catapulted into the world's spotlight and was dubbed 'the fastest reporter in America during her lifetime...' In her honor, the Pennsylvania Railroad called its fastest train the Nellie Bly Express. The train traveled [daily] through New Jersey between New York City and Atlantic City."

It was this express train that William H. Kale, my great grandfather, would occasionally ride home from school after class. "He would ride in the first car behind the engine and coal car. But this time there was no room for him, it was full of [Italian] migrant workers, so he and the other students from Rider had to sit in one of the cars in the back."

The Nellie Bly express normally ran in two sections but February 21, 1901 was an exceptionally busy day because of people traveling for the Washington's Birthday holiday, so a third section was added. It was this last section that carried William H. Kale and the Italian laborers.

In railroad operations in the 19th Century, if a train was overcrowded and there were more passengers that needed to travel, railroad operators and managers would simply add another train [called a section"]. It followed behind the other one, not too far distant...This doubling of trains often led to accidents."

This was the first time that the Nellie Bly ran in three sections – as three separate trains – instead of the usual two. Therefore, the railroad had to take precautions. For example, the second section of the Nellie Bly carried a signal; green flags on the engine, to indicate another section following. Orders were also issued to the conductors of all northbound train informing them that the Nellie Bly was in three sections.

19th Century train conductors – as well as modern day conductors – are considered the "captain" of the train. They, not the engineers, are responsible for train safety and punctuality. They have the final say as to when a train is able to move. "Responsibility for starting a train rested with the conductor" and not the engineer.

Edward S. Sapp of Bordentown, New Jersey, was a conductor working for the Amboy Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. He had been in charge of an accommodation train (that is, a local commuter train) that ran from Camden to Trenton since 1895.

On February 21, 1901 Conductor Sapp and Thomas Boulden, the engineer, were taking their accommodation train to Trenton. They had both received orders from the railroad dispatcher in Camden stating that the Nellie Bly would be traveling south in three sections that day.

The accommodation train was ordered to meet the first section of the Nellie Bly at Switch Number 3 at Bordentown, where they would pull to the side and allow it to pass. They were to continue north to the Shipyard Siding at Bordentown where they would take the siding and allow the second and third section of the Nellie Bly to pass. They could then continue on towards Trenton, and expect to meet local train #333 at "switch No. 2 at Rusling Siding".

All went according to plan. The accommodation train did, indeed, meet the first section of the Nellie Bly at "Switch Number 3 at Bordentown", and they safely pulled aside allowing it to pass. They continued on to Shipyard Siding where they once again took the siding and allowed the second section of the Nellie Bly to pass. Conductor Sapp saw green flags on the engine of the Nellie Bly, a signal that another section was following behind. However, he mistook this to mean the local train that was following further behind that he was to meet at Rusling Siding. "All notice of the part of the orders referring to the third section of the Nellie Bly seemed to be overlooked."

Harry Price, a modeler in the Bordentown Pottery, was sitting in the rear of the accommodation train. When they pulled into the Shipyard siding, Conductor Sapp said to him, "We will have to wait here for the second section of the Nellie Bly." At that moment a shrill whistle was heard and the conductor remarked, "The wait will not be very long for here she comes." Although Conductor Sapp had not ordered the engineer to pull out onto the main track, when the engineer did so, "I thought it was all right" and he did not stop the train.

Meanwhile, the Nellie Bly was running about 20 minutes behind schedule. Full of "excursionists and laborers" on their way from New York to Atlantic City, they had left Jersey City, where they picked up the Italian workers, at 3:14 pm. It was now 5:30 in the evening. "The express had made frequent stops on the run down from New York and was slowing up just north of Bordentown...At this point there is a curve." However, According to Michael McGowen, the fireman on the Nellie Bly, "we were late and were going as fast as we knew how. As we rounded the curve near the Shipyard siding, I said to Engineer [Walter] Earle, 'My God, here comes a train!' Earle replied, 'Jump and save yourself! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!'" The last thing McGowen saw was Earle putting on the emergency break and making other hurried preparations for stopping.

George Howard of Center Street, Trenton, stated that "after leaving Bordentown, we were side-tracked on the Shipyard siding in order to allow the second section of the Nellie Bly to pass. Immediately after this section had passed, our train pulled out on to the main track and proceeded at a good rate of speed toward Trenton." As they rounded the curve...he saw the approaching headlight of the on-rushing express.

The following description is from the February 22, 1901 *Trenton Evening Times*:

The wreck occurred just as the local Camden train had pulled around a bend, on the canal bank, after leaving the Bordentown Station. The shock came with such suddenness that many were sent hurling through the windows into the icy water of the canal. Luckily the canal was low at the time, or the death list would have been even greater...The cars piled up in all directions and two went over the bank into the canal bed...The most terrifying feature of the wreck was the fire that broke out immediately after the [collision]. The stoves were overturned and while the passengers in the new coaches looked on helpless and miles from aid of any kind, the wretches pinioned down beneath the burning cars lay and roasted to death. Others were crushed outright between the colliding cars. Walter Earle, the engineer of the Bly was caught beneath the tender of the accommodation train and...his head was found 20 feet from the place where his body lay. Thompson, the engineer of the accommodation train, jumped into the canal as he saw the headlight of the Nellie Bly rounding the corner and escaped with a few slight bruises. It was on the Nelly Bly express, in the forward coach between the engine and the baggage car that the greatest number of fatalities occurred. These, crowded on the seats, were about 30 Italians, on their way from New York to begin construction work in Atlantic City. Few of these came out alive. The frail coach was crushed like an eggshell when the engine and baggage car closed in on it, and a moment later blazed up...when the stoves overturned. Behind the baggage car was a day coach crowded with excursionists on their way to spend Washington's Birthday at Atlantic City. This car was overturned as if it were a feather and thrown into the canal, which runs on both sides of the high embankment. Behind the Nelly Bly baggage car, which was not badly damaged, lay an overturned passenger coach, which was riven and literally torn to shreds. These cars were thrown to the right of the track by the terrible force of the collision. One stood upright in the canal bed and the other lay overturned on the bank.

According to the New York Times, "both engines were reduced to a mass of broken and twisted iron and the car containing the Italians was crushed to splinters and all its occupants were buried under the mass of wreckage. The second car piled up in the first, and the third car crashed into the mass and tumbled into the canal alongside the railroad. The remaining three cars [one of which carried William H. Kale] did not overturn."

George Howard, survivor of the accommodation train stated, that "when the crash came, we were all thrown from our seats and Conductor Sapp was thrown nearly from one end of the car to the other. He was quite badly cut about the head. As soon as possible, we rushed out of the car and forward to the place where the damage was creates...the smoking car was almost immediately kindled in flames. This car was nearly reduced to kindling wood by the collision and the flames made such headway among the debris that it would hardly seem possible to find a trace of a human body there after the flames had consumed the woodwork. To give an accurate account of the terrible catastrophe is attempting the impossible as the scene that followed the crash was simply indescribable."

The next morning, daylight "only added to the horror of the terrible wreck. The moans of the injured and torn, the cries of the dying were stilled and the lurid, red glare of the burning wreckage had disappeared, but daylight revealed more clearly the mass of twisted iron and timbers smoldering and

smoking, with here and there the remnants of what was only yesterday a human being, the owner of a soul, since sent to join its maker. To add to the horror, the smell of burning flesh..."

Immediately railroad officials put the blame of the crash on the "crew of the local train which was in the charge of Conductor Sapp and Engineer Thompson, both of Camden. The railroad authorities say that the crew of this train had been given orders to meet the express at Bordentown – that is, to wait on a siding at that point until the express should have passed. Instead of doing this, however, they kept on up the road and met the express at Rusling's Siding, above Bordentown, and a head-on collision occurred."

As one can imagine, Sapp was in a state of shock. John Thaler, of Trenton, who was an employee of the Ironsides Pottery in Bordentown, had missed the accommodation train that night, so he decided to walk home. "On the way up he met Conductor Sapp, half staggering and with a wild, haggard look on his face, going toward Bordentown." A headline ran showing concern that "Sapp May Lose His Mind – Feared That If Told He Caused Wreck He Will Go Insane."

John Macgee's son, Thomas, was one of the victims of the wreck. The father and son both worked at the Ironsides Pottery in Bordentown. Thomas and some other co-workers left work to catch the accommodation train back home to Trenton. His father worked later than usual and so did not catch the train with the others.

Shortly after quitting work he heard about the wreck and started on a run for the scene. He was half-crazed at being unable to see his son in the crowd surrounding the wreck and then he ran up to the very verge of the furnace-like fire that was consuming the cars. Horror-stricken, he had to retreat, for the heat was unbearable. After seeing the wreck of the smoker car where he was told his son had been sitting, he was convinced his son was dead, for a glance at the twisted, splintered fragments of the smoker seemed proof positive that no human being could have escaped alive. After frantically searching for his son nearly all night he gave up out of sheer exhaustion until the next day. It was a couple of days later that his son's coat was found in the canal. His son's body was never recovered.

One woman, from New York City, survived the wreck thanks to her hair. As reported in the New York Times on February 23, 1901, Miss Harry Lyon...was on the [Nellie Bly] express in company with her friend, Mrs. Belle Freeman, bound for Atlantic City to spend the holiday. When the crash came [Miss Lyon] was thrown through one of the windows of the car and hung on the outside by her hair until it settled down on the ice of the canal, enabling her to get a foothold. They both suffered from severe shock. Their car was the third from the locomotive and was an ordinary day car, as they had been unable to get parlor car seats. Miss Lyon occupied the aisle seat. She remembers that her friend was thrown forward as their seat was wrenched from its fastenings by the force of the collision, that the cushion on which they were sitting was hurled through the window and her after it. As she went through she caught the sill with her hand, otherwise her hair, which caught on the sash, would probably have been torn out by the roots. Just how long she remained so she cannot tell, but after her feet touched the ice she was unable to disengage herself, and was only freed when one of her fellow-survivors, a man, cut her hair where it had caught and helped her to a place of safety. Miss Lyon is badly

cut about the face and head, and there is a deep wound on one of her eyelids. She has severe bruises all over her body.

Doctors H.M. Beatty and Charles Mitchell of Trenton drove to the crash site. "The cries of the wounded and dying were simply awful. One man, who had a compound fracture of the jaw, was yelling at the top of his voice for help." The injured were found on both sides of the canal that ran along side the railroad track. "After repeated calling from the opposite side of the canal they succeeded in getting someone to throw wreckage into the canal so they could cross upon it. Dr. Mitchell went across [but] Dr. Beatty found it impossible to cross at that time. Train hands did not assist the physicians to cross the canal; they seemed too busy looking after baggage." Dr. Beatty's impression was that "the railroad people were more anxious to save baggage than to get bodies from the wrecked cars."

Doctors MacKenzie, Mcgalliard and County Physician Rogers received word of the wreck and together started for the accident scene on a special train. "They only got as far as Broad Street Station when they received word that the train could go no farther and they returned to Clinton Street [Station] and subsequently went to St. Francis Hospital where a number of the injured had been taken."

The survivors of the Nellie Bly were taken to Camden, NJ in a special train. Also, "the wounded were distributed among the three Trenton hospitals..." Six of the injured were taken to Cooper Hospital and the others who could stand the journey continued on to Atlantic City. The ones taken to Cooper Hospital were all Italians. The train arrived in Camden not long after 9:00pm. "The passengers were a pitiful-looking company. Many of the women had either their heads or arms tied up and were badly bespattered with blood. A number of men were also bandaged."

Coroner Bower of Trenton arranged to have the railroad company erect dams in the canal on each side of the wreck. Water was to be pumped out to permit a thorough search for missing bodies, "or parts of them". Railroad employees "dug up the canal bed and embankment at the side of the wreck to the depth of several feet. The result was that several little heaps of ashes and charred bones were brought to light. This indicates that at least four bodies were incinerated. In one heap was a rib and portion of a shoe; while near the other was a portion of a hat, the inner band bearing the initials W.C. These correspond to the initials of William Cochran, one of the missing Trentonians."

One scene that horrified the workers searching for remains occurred on the afternoon of February 25th. Workers had found a few bones, "all that is mortal of one who was a passenger on the local train." The bones were gathered and placed in a small pile on the side of the road away from the wreckage while they awaited the arrival of the coroner. "Then to their horror a prowling dog discovered the bones and began to gnaw them with all the ravishness of his savage nature." The workmen all froze in horror but then began to yell and throw rocks at the dog chasing him away.

"During the day one of the searchers found a gold watch, pocketbook and a revolver...The searcher declined to give his name or turn the articles over to the coroner...The person that found the articles left the spot soon after."

Among other artifacts discovered in the wreckage were clothing, coats, hats, "a collar from a coat, together with the rim and portion of a derby hat and two sleeves, torn from a coat." All of the items collected were kept at Taylor's Morgue in Trenton in hopes that they might help find the missing or identify the dead.

As soon as word of the accident had reached Bordentown, P.F.H. Brakeley, foreman of the Chemical Engine Company, made his way to the scene.

From the brow of a hill in Bordentown he saw the flames and thought the fire apparatus would be of some service...the [chemical] engine was taken to the wreck aboard a flat car. It was about 7:30 when the chemical started for the wreck. On the way up the track a train coming from the wreck was met and the chemical engine was run back to Bordentown to allow the other train to pass. It was 8:00 before the chemical finally got to the wreck and then it was found impossible to get within 280 feet of the demolished cars. The engine did not go into service because it had only 200 feet of hose and [the] stream could not be gotten upon the flames. Mr. Brakeley said he did not think the chemical engine could have done anything but extinguish a few burning embers. Even if there had been sufficient hose to reach the main part of the fire it would be almost impossible to unload the chemical engine on account of the condition of the surrounding country.

According to Joseph Osmond, chief engineer of the Bordentown Fire Department, "if a steam engine, instead of the chemical, had been sent to the wreck it might have done some good...but on account of there being little water available and the almost utter impossibility of getting the engine into position for service at that place, it was not deemed advisable to send the steamer at that time."

Mr. Osmond said that "to the casual observer it would appear there was needless delay in getting the chemical to the scene, but such was not the case." The time it had reached the wreck, "the flames had been burning long and fiercely enough to consume any bodies that might be in it and, therefore, to put the fire out would only mean the saving of the wreckage.

However, John Matthews and H.G. Wright, both of the Bordentown Fire Department, felt that in their judgement the chemical engine "could easily have been unloaded from the flat car and been put in position to extinguish the flames." Matthews "considered it a lack of duty on the part of those in charge that it was not put in service."

Astonishingly, the horrible wreck of the Nelly Bly could have been much worse than it was. "A package of a particular aspect was taken from the ruins and when it was examined later in Camden...it was found to contain dynamite." The only explanation for the presence of dynamite on the Nellie Bly is that it was being carried by some of the Italian laborers who were on their way to a job of excavating near Atlantic City. "They would have use for the stuff in their work and it is thought some of them were carrying it as baggage to save expense and to avoid the difficulty attending the shipment of explosives. It is said there is nothing unusual about these men carrying dynamite in this way and it seems to be the only reasonable explanation of the question...Coroner Bower says there was fifteen pounds of the stuff in the package."

Mercer County Physician R.R. Rogers Jr. ordered Coroner J.R.D. Bower to “conduct a searching inquest into the wreck.” The jury only needed to view one of the “torn and charred bodies...and not all, as...all the persons killed came to their end by reason of the same cause and in the eyes of the law the verdict will be the same in each case.”

“Both General Superintendent Sheppard of the United Railway of New Jersey and Division Superintendent Abercrombie admitted...that the crew of the accommodation train disobeyed the train orders.” C.W. Kunzi, the telegraph operator in the Pennsylvania Railroad station in Bordentown said that the orders received from the Camden train dispatcher “were faithfully executed by him but disobeyed by Engineer Thompson and Conductor Sapp of the local train.”

The Coroner’s Jury found both Engineer Benjamin Thompson and Conductor Edward Sapp of the local accommodation train guilty of negligence in failing to obey orders. The verdict also censured the Pennsylvania Railroad Company for not having a double track between Trenton and Burlington.

On May 14, 1901, Justice Gummere charged the Grand Jury to find on indictment against Conductor Sapp. In his charge to the jury he said, “Sapp is guilty of manslaughter and should be indicted.” However, on June 10th, the Grand Jury failed to indict Sapp. Instead, he was censured for “failing to read correctly the orders intended to control movement of his train.” Fortunately for him, mitigating circumstances relieved him of criminal liability.

Edward Sapp continued to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad until the morning of April 19, 1906 when he dropped dead at his post in the Camden terminal of a massive heart attack. He was only 55 years old and he left behind a wife and two adult children. The Rev. E.F. Garrett, Pastor of the Baptist Church in Bordentown, held his funeral on April 22, 1906, and six fellow train conductors served as pallbearers. He was buried in the Bordentown Cemetery.

Seventeen people were killed and at least 21 were severely injured in the wreck of the Nellie Bly. However, the Trenton Times wrote on March 2, 1901 that, “the death list will never be fully known, as the hungry flames...may have consumed many whose absence may never be accounted for.” The Nellie Bly express continued to run from New York to Atlantic City until the early 1960s. Today, New Jersey Transit’s River Line runs along the same tracks as the Nellie Bly, taking commuters once again from Trenton to Camden. At the Riverton Station, passengers can cross the street to the Nellie Bly Olde Tyme Ice Cream Parlour and order a “Train Wreck” Banana Split.

Taken from the website: <http://njspmuseum.blogspot.com/2009/02/it-took-80-days-for-phineas-fogg-to.html>

The following are some photos taken over the next several days:











