

# THE GREAT TRAIN WRECK OF 1918



THE WORST TRAIN WRECK IN AMERICAN  
HISTORY HAPPENED IN NASHVILLE TN

# THE GREAT TRAIN WRECK OF 1918

- Happened at 7:20 AM, July 9, 1918
- Nashville, TN :Dutchman's Curve, just west of downtown (behind current location of St. Thomas Hospital)
- 101 dead
- Over 171 injured
- Two trains involved—Train #1 from Memphis and Train #4 from Nashville.

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- Train # 1 was coming from Memphis, TN, traveling northbound with a load of sleeping passengers.
- Many of the passengers were on their way to begin work at a large ammunition plant in Old Hickory.
- Train # 4 was coming from Nashville, traveling southbound carrying mostly mail and baggage.

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- Train # 1 from Memphis was traveling approximately 50 to 60 MPH and **did not** apply its air brakes as the accident happened.
- Train # 4 from Nashville was going about 45-50 MPH and **did** try to apply air brakes before hitting Train #1.

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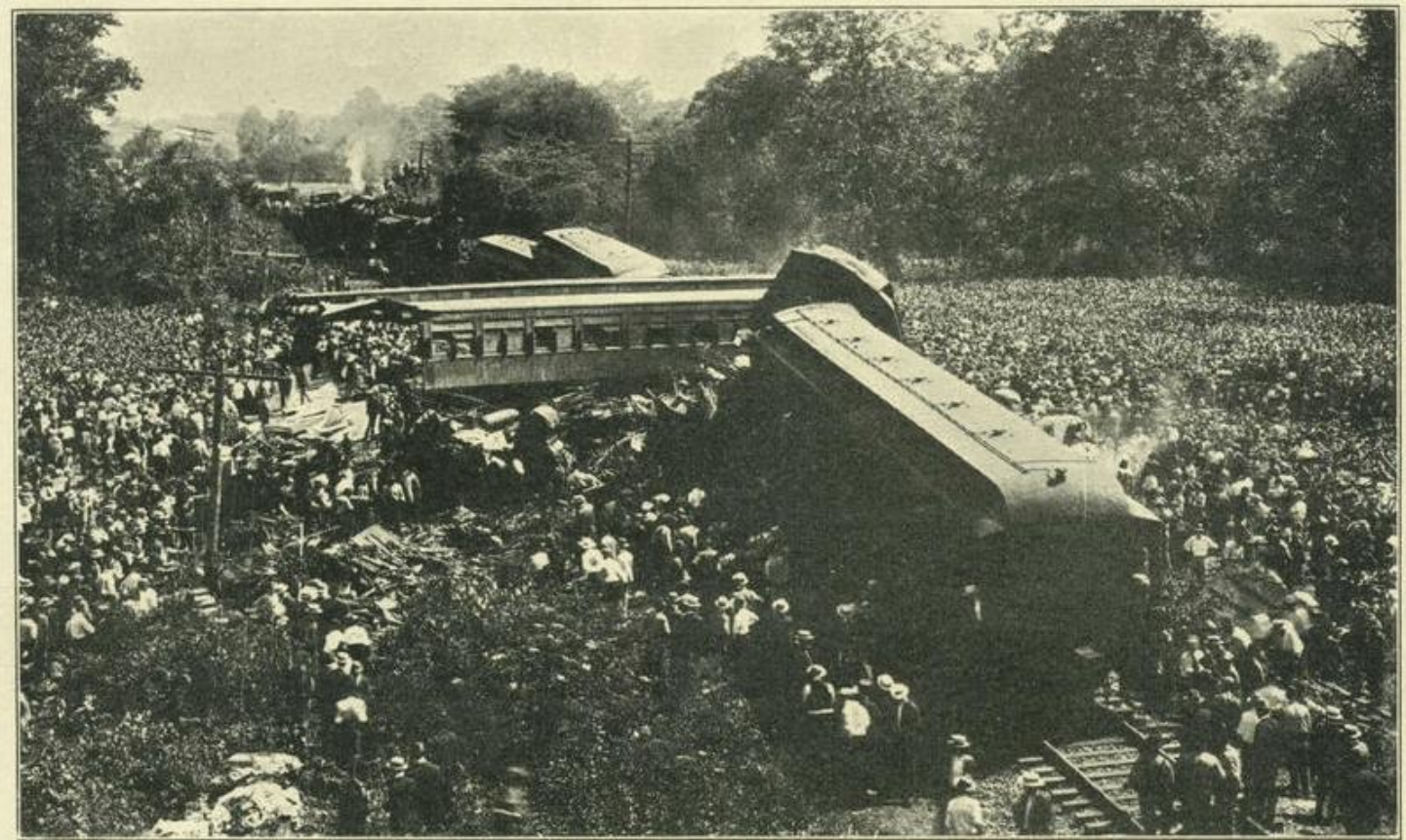


FIG. 1.—GENERAL VIEW OF WRECK.

Wreck was heard over 2 miles away when it happened. Several thousand Nashville residents dropped whatever they were doing and rushed to the site to help. There wasn't a lot they could do once they got there.

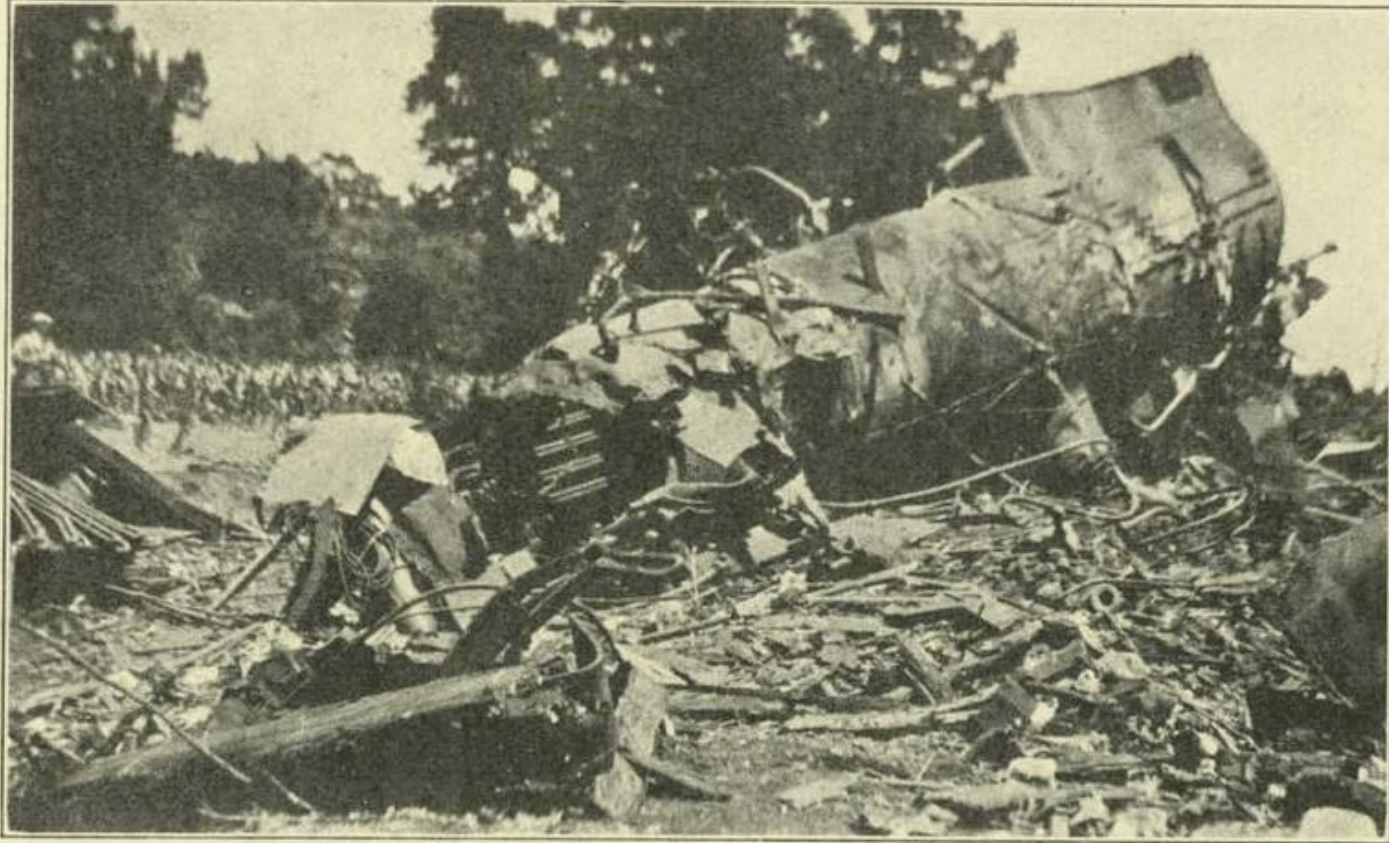
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FIG. 2.—VIEW OF DESTROYED EQUIPMENT.

Conductor on #4 train (Nashville) was supposed to watch for Train #1 but got busy stamping tickets for passengers. He mistook a switch engine passing them as the sound of Train #1. But it wasn't.

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Train #4 approached the junction, when a tower operator realized the error. They tried to signal the trains but the signals were missed. No one heard their emergency whistle, either. This is what's left of the Train #1 boiler, a large steel structure, thrown several yards from the track.

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FIG. 3.—BOILERS OF LOCOMOTIVES 281 (TOP) AND 282 (BOTTOM).

Train #1 was running 30 minutes late, so they had sped up to make up time. They expected Train #4 to wait at the junction until they had passed, which was standard operating procedure. But Train #4 was speeding toward them. This is what's left of the boiler for Train #4, the Nashville train.

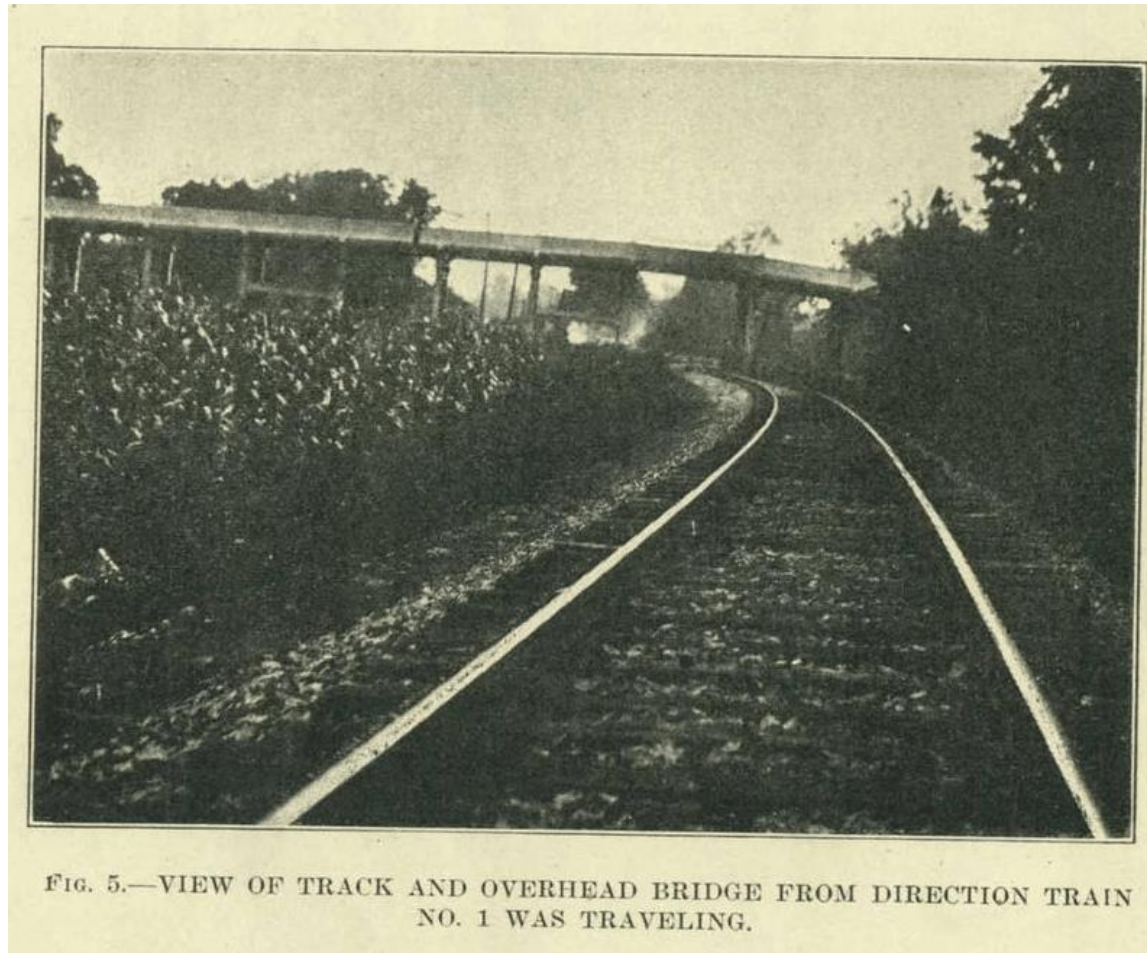


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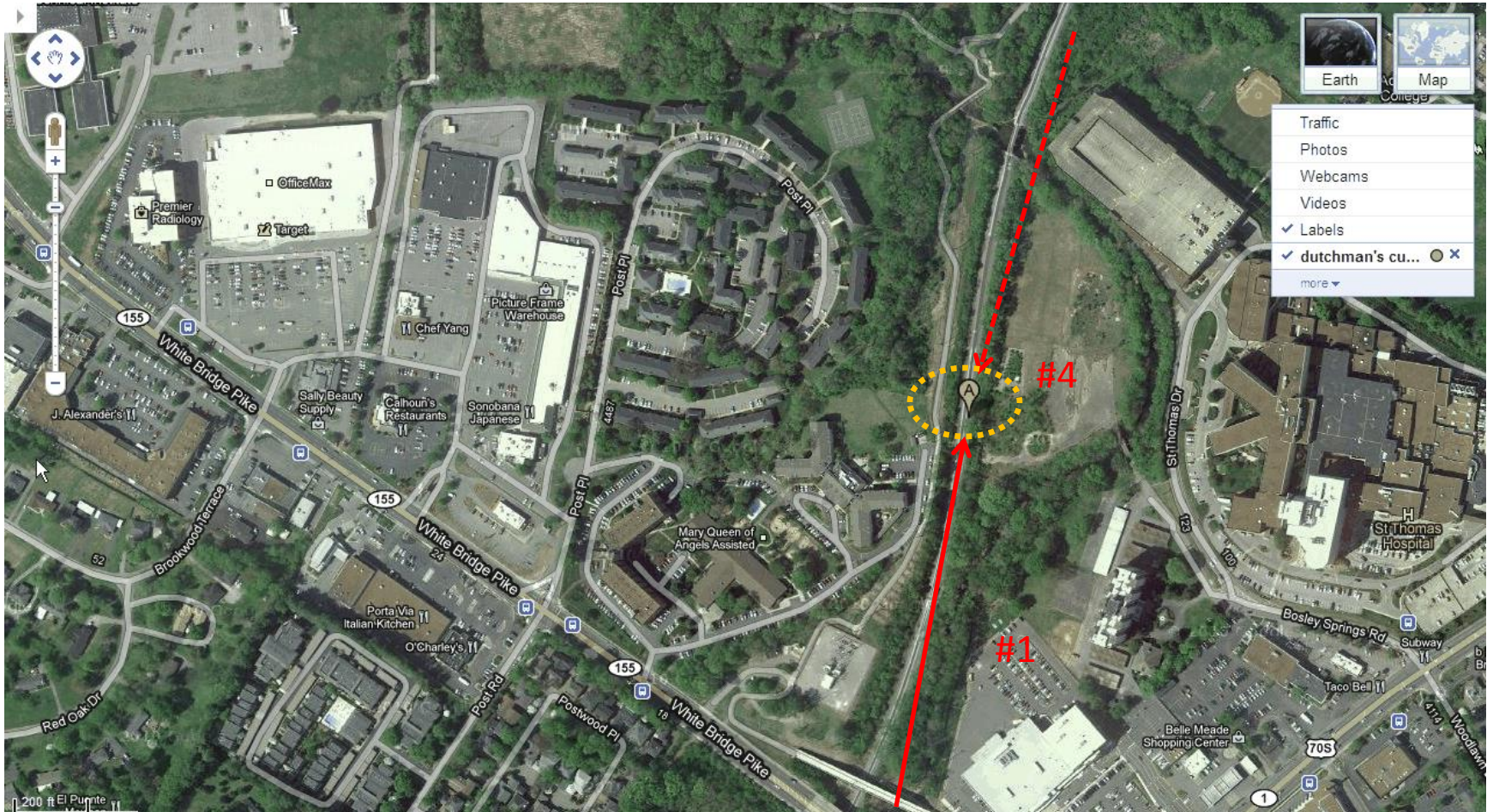
All the cars in both trains, with the exception of two cars in Train #1, were wooden and destroyed upon impact. The few steel cars survived better but ironically contributed to the severe casualties by creating a telescoping effect, where one car was driven into another.

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Train #1 was coming up towards Nashville, running late, and pushing hard to make their schedule. Train #4 was coming down from Nashville and was speeding along, thinking the Memphis train had already passed through the junction.

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The Nashville #4 train was traveling in a downward direction at 45-50 MPH and the Memphis #1 train was traveling in an upwards direction on this map going about 50-60 MPH when they collided head on. The A marks the spot of collision.

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A small memorial to the victims is nearby on a green way.

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- Results of train wreck investigation:
  - Safety measures were ignored; ICC recommended better training and communication
  - ICC also felt that wooden sleeping cars were unsafe and should be replaced
  - A better system for identifying trains on the tracks was developed since the existing system failed so badly

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- The original ICC (Interstate Commerce Commission) report is available on-line.
- The Great Train Wreck is also an article in Wikipedia.org
- There was a country song written about it, called, oddly enough, “The Great Nashville Train Disaster (A True Story)” and was recorded by David Allen Coe in 1980.

# The End...

