



Quiet Corner Railroad Horror: The Great East Thompson Train Wreck

The beginning of next month will mark the 132nd anniversary of one of the worst railroad disasters in American history: The Great East Thompson Train Wreck. On the morning of December 4th, 1891, four separate trains would collide in Thompson, Connecticut. It would be the first of only two accidents involving four trains in United States history. The wreck would occur just a short distance away from the CT-MA-RI tri-state marker in the northeastern corner of Connecticut, around the intersection of New Road and East Thompson Road. The various trains involved were using the New York & New England rail line, offering quick and easy transportation from New York to Boston. Today, the relevant part of this railroad line no longer exists. The tracks have been removed and the railbed now serves as the Air Line State Park Trail stretching from East Hampton to Thompson. I took a trip out to the Thompson section of the trail to see the site of the crash now in 2023. The trail is linear and flat due to its previous history supporting railroad tracks and has bits of history along the way. Information used for this article was provided by the informational historical signage placed along the trail with research by the Thompson Historical Society unless otherwise stated.



The Air Line State Park Trail. It's history as a railroad track is easily recognizable. Thompson CT. (Fall 2023).

The railroad going through northeast Connecticut was quite popular for both freight and passenger travel at the time as it was the most direct route between New York and Boston. The double tracks consisted of a westbound line for trains heading west and an eastbound line for eastward travel. Similar to the two-lane road we drive on every day. The East Thompson station was a transfer point for the railroad with a turntable allowing trains to reverse direction. The Putnam railroad station was a bustling hub for the area. On the foggy morning of December 4th, four trains would collide in a matter of minutes around 6:40 a.m. due to a disastrous decision made by the train dispatcher at the Putnam station. Sometime before the incident, the crew of the *Southbridge Local* freight train #31 were assembling the cars of their train near the East Thompson railroad station. They planned to head towards Southbridge, MA using a short “spur”

railroad line that left out of East Thompson. However, they were allowed to sit in the westbound main railroad line to assemble their freight train as there were no eastbound trains expected to use that westbound line at that time.

Over in Putnam, dispatchers needed to get two passenger trains and one freight train on their way to Boston. These were trains #212 *Boston Freight* with 11 cars heading from Putnam to Boston, passenger train #8 *Long Island and Eastern States Express* with 4 cars heading from New York to Boston, and passenger train #16 *Norwich Boat Train* with 3 cars heading from New York to Boston (Thompson Historical Society). These trains would be traveling eastward through Thompson. The freight train was scheduled to leave first. Yet, the freight train was slower than the two passenger trains. Speed was paramount in passenger railroad travel. Having two passenger trains stuck behind the slower freight train was seen as inexpedient. The dispatcher devised a solution where the slower freight train, #212 *Boston Freight*, would leave the station traveling eastbound on the westbound track. This would allow the two passenger trains to leave the station using the proper eastbound lane and eventually pass the slower freight train. The freight train temporarily using the “wrong lane” would then switch over to the proper lane once it entered Massachusetts and the other two trains had passed. Somehow, both the operators of #212 *Boston Freight* and the dispatcher had forgotten about *Southbridge Local*, still sitting stationary on the westbound line in East Thompson. This would lead to disastrous consequences as all trains left within a short time frame of one another and there was no way to contact the operators once the train had left the station.



East Thompson Train Wreck. Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, UConn. Licensed under CC BY-NC



East Thompson Train Wreck. Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center. UConn. Licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0.

To the horror of the East Thompson station agents, #212 *Boston Freight* appeared out of the fog at approximately 6:40 a.m. One station agent was able to warn the crew of the stationary *Southbridge Local* to evacuate their train before the racing freight train crashed head-on. The trains immediately jackknifed, scattering train cars and debris across both lanes of the railroad. Runners were sent with lanterns down the eastbound line to warn the approaching passenger trains. Using only lanterns in foggy weather, in addition to the speed in which the passenger trains were moving, it was impossible to stop them in time. A few minutes after the first

collision, the *Long Island and Eastern States Express* plowed into the wreckage at 50 miles per hour. Just three minutes after this, the *Norwich Boat Train* collided into the rear of the other passenger train. Fires then begin to break out among the mass of wreckage. The passenger trains *Long Island and Eastern States Express* and *Norwich Boat Train* were carrying 13 and 75 passengers respectively (Thompson Historical Society). Incredibly, only two people were confirmed dead from this incident the following day, although it is probable that dozens were injured (*Waterbury Evening Democrat*). The two fatalities were engineer Harry Taber and fireman Gerry Fitzgerald; both aboard the *Long Island and Eastern States Express*. A passenger by the name of R. H. Rath also died in the wreckage, bringing the total up to three, but he does not regularly appear in reports of the wreck. During litigation following the accident, lawyers for the train company had insinuated that Rath was faking his death. Therefore, the family was not entitled to compensation and Mr. Rath was never declared dead. More recently, Mark Snay from the Thompson Historical Society has confirmed Rath's death (Iamartino).



Roughly the site of the crash today, a parking lot and entry point to the Air Line State Park Trail near the intersection of New Rd and East Thompson Rd. Thompson CT. (Fall 2023).



The East Thompson Railroad Station is long gone, but it would have been located directly to the right of this sign along the trail. (Fall 2023).

All four engines involved with the disaster were destroyed and 500 yards of railroad tracks were damaged. An early estimate of the financial loss to the New York and New England railroad was upwards of \$100,000 (*Morning Journal and Courier*). Regardless, one remarkable fact about this accident aside from the miraculous lack of death toll was just how quickly the wrecking crews and firemen were able to get the rail line operational again. By mid-afternoon of that same day, trains were able to pass through on one side of the line in East Thompson on their way from Boston to New York.

Ryan Elgin serves as EC-CHAP Assistant Director, Curator of the Gardiner Hall Jr History Museum, and Volunteer Coordinator. He may be contacted directly at ryan@ec-chap.org.

The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.

References

Allen, Mike, and Joe Iamartino. "The Day 4 Trains Collided in 10 Minutes." *Amazing Tales from Off and On Connecticut's Beaten Path*, PodBean, 19 Oct. 2022.

"Great East Thompson 4-Engine Train Wreck." *Thompson Historical Society*, thompsonhistorical.org/.

"Informational Historical Signage." Air Line State Park Trail, Thompson, CT.

"A Railroad Horror." *Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, 5 Dec. 1891.

"Two Were Killed." *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, 5 Dec. 1891, p. 1.

Sourced via Library of Congress