

# Railroad Wrecks (1993; ISBN: 0845348442)

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## **ACT OF GOD TRAIN DISASTER: NEW JERSEY—JUNE 1925—51 DEAD**

Now and then there are train accidents that must be considered “unavoidable” in the sense that they were due to no person’s obvious incompetency or negligence and no failure of railway equipment. Under the circumstances where evidence is lacking that any individual is responsible for the calamity and is no evident breakdown of vital railroad modus operandi, it must be placed in the category “Act of God.” Such a disaster happened in north Jersey at 3:25 A.M. on 16 June 1925. A special train of the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad derailed at a location just three miles west of Hackettstown, New Jersey known as Rockport Sag, between Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania and Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey. The train was traveling from Chicago to Hoboken, New Jersey, carrying 132 passengers—part of a contingent of 250 German-Americans, vacation-bound, on their way to board a steamship for Bremen, Germany. Shortly before the train reached the point of derailment, an electrical storm and cloudburst occurred, and great quantities of sand, gravel, and rock were washed down a three hundred-foot steep grade adjoining the railroad, which deposited at least six inches of debris on the tracks. As the train’s engine hit this obstruction, its pony truck wheels were derailed, and they bumped along the roadway for about one hundred eighty feet, striking the cross-over switch frog of Rockport siding. The switch was smashed as the left front locomotive drive wheel skidded off the track and plunged into a twelve-foot embankment, throwing the engine over on its side. Two day coaches and two Pullman cars followed the engine off the rails. The first day coach mounted the disabled engine, the next coach was thrown crosswise on the tracks, and the two Pullman cars overturned; the last three cars of the train stayed on the tracks. Almost immediately the locomotive boiler exploded, sending out live steam and scalding to death those passengers in the coaches who had survived the original derailment. To make the terror worse, all train lights were quickly extinguished casting the whole scene into total darkness. The engineer, two firemen, and the head trainman were instantly killed.

The first rescue parties consisted of Pullman passengers from those cars which had not derailed, but initially the escaping steam prevented entry into the derailed cars. Blankets and bedding from the sleepers were used to cover the victims as they were carried out of the wreckage. Many windows were smashed by the rescuers to afford an exit route for those passengers able to move about. Makeshift stretchers were fabricated from berth mattresses and wooden doors. Rescue efforts were supported by scores of farmers residing in the vicinity of the railroad. Additional manpower and medical doctors were rushed in from hospitals in Phillipsburg, Morristown, and Dover, New Jersey. Physicians administered morphine injections to fully 50 persons, most of whom were suffering from the scalding then received. Sixty persons were transferred to the hospitals by ambulance, and those less seriously injured were later transported in Pullman cars converted into temporary first aid centers. Bodies were taken to a morgue in Hackettstown. A special train from Morristown completed the journey to Hoboken for the survivors, including many with only slight burns or lacerations, where they boarded the S.S. Republic. Railroad

wrecking crews from Stroudsburg worked all day, 16 June 1925, clearing away the wreckage; in the meantime, all Lackawanna trains were sent over a new cut-off between Water Gap and Lake Hopatcong. State police, from their headquarters at Netcong, controlled the hordes of spectators who congregated at the scene soon after news of the catastrophe became public.

An investigation of the disaster was begun on 16 June by the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities. Justice of the Peace E.J. Wildrick of Hackettstown was empowered by Dr. G.W. Cummings, county physician of Warren County, to empanel a coroner's jury to conduct an inquest into the deaths of 8 victims. Coroner William Fisk of Phillipsburg prepared to hold a separate inquest. On 17 June, with additional deaths reported in various hospitals, the number of dead from the train derailment reached 44. Twenty-five persons were still hospitalized, 13 of whom were in critical condition.

On 17 June six investigations of the accident were underway by the following organizations: the Federal Interstate Commerce Commission, the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities, the Prosecutor of Warren County, two county coroners, and the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad. Officials of these bodies, who visited the scene of the disaster, were inclined to agree with railroad management that no responsibility could be attached to anyone—it was considered an "Act of God." If a watchman or track walker had been on duty at the time of the accident, it was held in some quarters they might have been able to observe the sand and gravel driven down on the tracks from the hillside caused a dangerous obstruction, and they might have been able to warn the oncoming train in time to prevent the accident. On the other hand, it was pointed out, the accident occurred at the end of a terrible electrical rainstorm and neither the watchmen of the track walker might have been on the spot in time to prevent the wreck.

By 18 June 1925 the count of those who had perished in the Hackettstown train calamity numbered 45. A special train made up of one passenger coach and two baggage cars, departed Hackettstown on the afternoon of 18 June with the bodies of 34 victims; twenty relatives of the dead, who had arrived from Chicago, were aboard the "special," which was later made part of a regularly scheduled train due back in Chicago on 20 June 1925.

On 19 June the death toll to the train accident of 16 June reached 46 people. Completed investigations by various entities resulted in the conclusion that no blame could be assessed to anyone for the wreck. The New Jersey Utilities Commission determined that the train's speed at fifty miles per hour was normal and was not a factor in this accident. Justice of the Peace Wildrick of Hackettstown abandoned his proposed inquest because he was convinced there had been no criminal negligence.

On 27 June 1925, with the death of several more victims in the Easton Hospital, the toll in the Lackawanna wreck at Rockport Sag, New Jersey, reached a total of 51 persons.