

Dr. Gurdon Wadsworth Russell's Account of the 1853 Railroad Accident at Norwalk, Connecticut

A Commentary on the Person, the Times, and the Event

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Introduction

AT the start of the new millennium, we find that barely a year passed during the 19th or 20th century without major catastrophic train accidents taking a great toll in human life and in economic loss. Tragedy becomes part of the fabric of the day and the times whether it is an accidental injury involving an individual or a mass casualty disaster. So it was in May, 147 years ago, when the railroad accident at Norwalk, Connecticut, blended with other events throughout the world and entered life's continuum for the individuals concerned. The objective of this paper is to offer a brief historical commentary and to provide the firsthand account of the accident itself by Gurdon Wadsworth Russell, M.D. (1815-1909). It is believed to be the first written account of a railroad accident by a physician who personally witnessed and professionally reported on what happened and about the people involved. An abbreviated version was presented as the President's Address of the 1985 Annual Meeting of the Hartford Medical Society. Generally available resources for historical information have been used or updated and are readily available to health-care professionals, railroad historians, students, and others.

The Person

Dr. Russell's imprint on the history of medicine in Hartford and Connecticut is well documented in his many personal publications, local community chronicles and archives of the insurance industry, and medical organizations.¹⁻⁴ In 1853, he was 38 years old having graduated from Yale Medical School 15 years earlier.³ The Connecticut State Medical Society was in its 62nd year and

would have Dr. Russell serve as its president in 1871.⁵ Russell's first wife, Sarah Elizabeth Tuttle, on 5 January 1853, gave birth to their daughter, Elizabeth Hotchkiss Russell, who died about two years later.⁶ The Hartford Medical Society that he helped found was celebrating its seventh year. At the Society meetings, Dr. Russell's colleagues, Drs. E.K. Hunt, Samuel Beresford, David Cray, Sr., George Sumner, James Jackson, and others discussed Dr. Horace Wells (1815-1848) and his work on anesthetic agents.⁷ Wells' profile is preserved on the seal of both the Hartford Medical Society and the Hartford Dental Society. Planning for the Hartford Hospital might have been an agenda item between 1851 and 1854. The 1902 Geer's Hartford City Directory revealed that Dr. Russell was the Hospital's president and chairman of the Medical and Surgical staff.²

Two months after the train accident, Aetna Life Insurance Company's first Board of Directors met on the fourth of July. Dr. Russell started work with the Aetna in 1850 and continued as Medical Director until 1902.³ He pioneered the newly developing field of life insurance medicine and underwriting and, in 1889, was elected the first vice president of the Association of Life Insurance Medical Directors of America.⁸ In that same year, the Hartford Medical Society was incorporated. Dr. Russell was its president from 1889-1893.⁷

The Times Circa 1853

While we do not know if, or how, Dr. Russell voted, Franklin Pierce, the Democrat from New Hampshire, was inaugurated as the nation's 14th president and at the time its youngest. Pierce's 11-year-old son, Benjamin, was killed in Andover, Massachusetts on 6 January 1853—the victim of a railway accident.^{9,10} Jefferson Davis, who

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Figure 1.—Originally entitled “The Catastrophe,” the illustration depicts the accident site at the drawbridge with a portion of one passenger car assumed to be the one in which Dr. Russell was riding. The engine struck the abutment followed by a baggage car, two mail cars, and two and one half passenger cars.

would later become President of the Confederate States, was appointed Secretary of War by Pierce. It is said that Davis directed valuable surveys for a railroad to the Pacific.¹¹ On the other side of the world, Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, U.S.N., presented letters and credentials to commissioners appointed by the Shogun or Military Governor of Japan. One provision of the treaty, signed later on, allowed for care of the crew of vessels washed ashore on the coast.^{12,13} Wedding bells rang in France at the January nuptials of Eugenie Maria de Montijo de Guzman and Napoleon III (Charles Louis Napoleon Bonaparte). She remained the Empress of the Second Empire from 1853 until 1870. Rapid development of French rail route miles occurred during this period.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Troubles leading to the Crimean War (1853-1856) brewed furiously, and places like Moldavia, Wallachia, and Bakaklava soon presented a medical nursing nightmare for Florence Nightingale.^{17,18} In the United States, Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) might have blown out 18 candles on his birthday cake, if that was the custom in Hannibal, Missouri. Bordering on the Mississippi River, Hannibal was developing into the eastern railhead of the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad.¹⁹

Laura Kinsbury conveyed the property on 125 Market Street in Hartford to George Beach for \$7,000. It originally belonged to Dr. Normond Morison, a physician, before the Revolutionary War. He is buried at the site with his son, Allan, a smallpox victim.²⁰

The Wadsworth Atheneum, named after its benefactor, Daniel Wadsworth, had a 10th anniversary. Today, the Atheneum is recognized as a thriving and internationally renowned art museum.²¹ Only a few city blocks away, the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company constructed an arms production plant along Park River to take advantage of a railroad line built in 1838.²² Plans are presumed to have been on the drawing board for the Colt Factory erected in 1855, still considered part of Connecticut's high technology triangle, namely, Hartford-Stratford-Groton.^{23,24} Out in the west, part of the land occupied by the State of Arizona was included in the James Gadsden Purchase for \$10,000. President Pierce named Gadsden, formerly a president of the South Carolina railroad, as Minister to Mexico.^{25,26}

During the year, Dr. James Marion Sims (1813-1883) moved from Alabama to New York and published a treatise on vesicovaginal fistula. Most clinicians are fa-

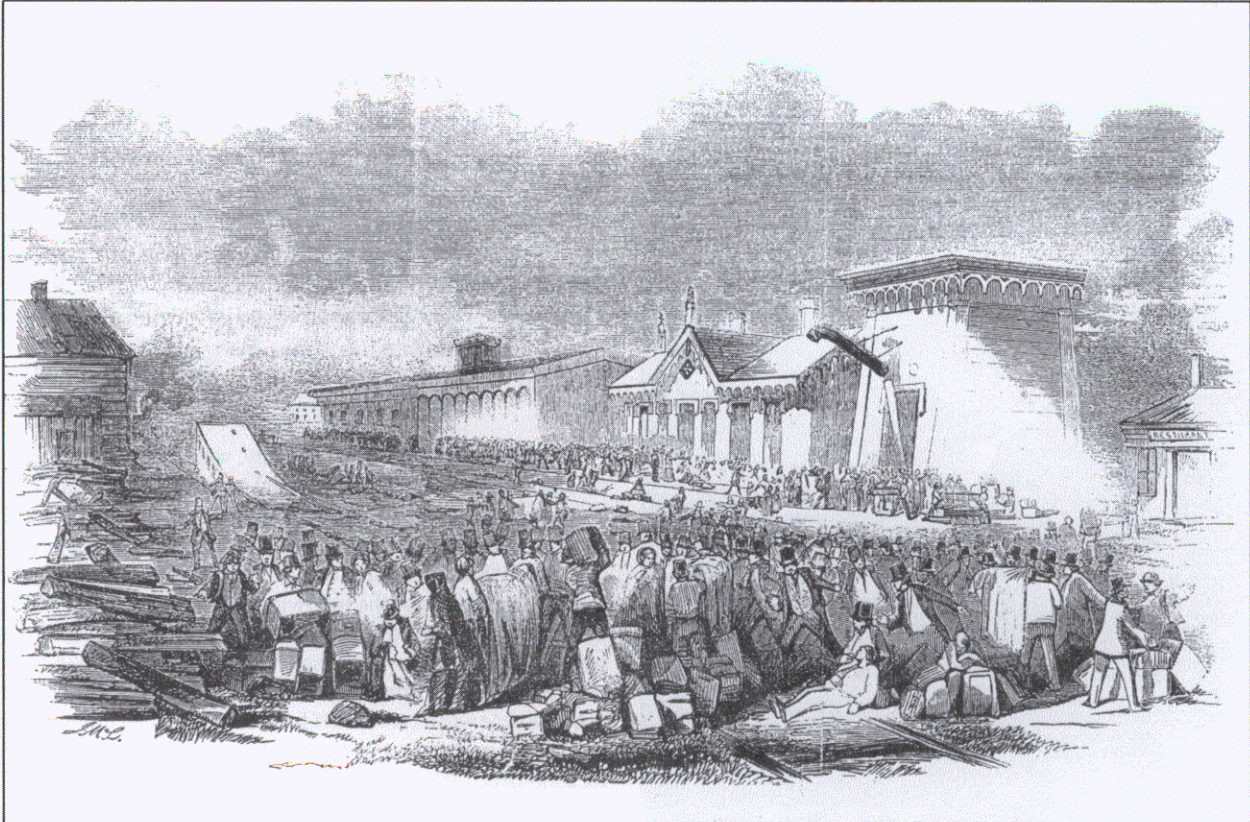


Figure 2. – The artist completed the illustration, captioned “Scene at the depot after the accident – bringing in the bodies,” sometime between the date of the accident and the publication date, 14 May 1853. The crew of a nearby sailing vessel, survivors including several physicians, and townsfolk assisted in rescue attempts and care of the injured.

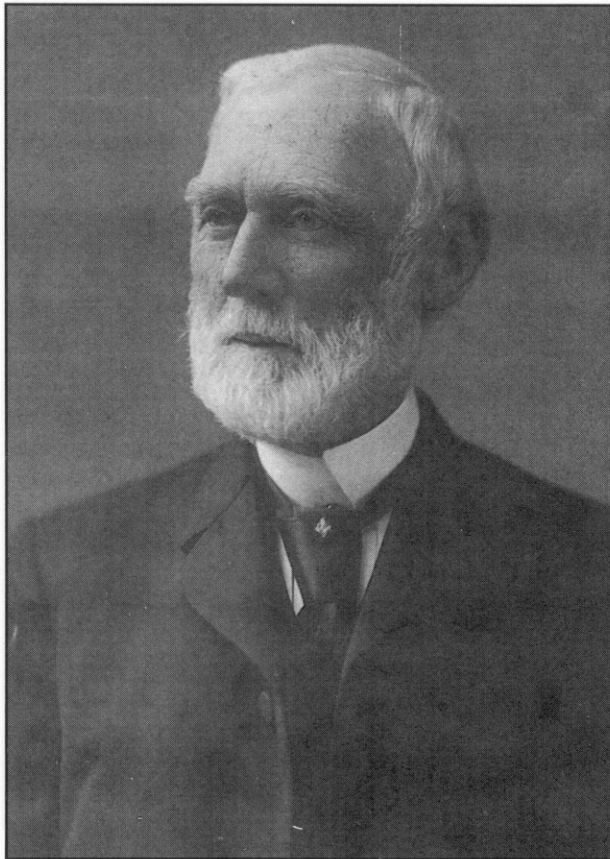
miliar with the Sims’ lateral examination position and the vaginal speculum he invented.²⁷ Meanwhile, struggling across the massive expanses of Africa without the benefit of any rail line, was David Livingstone (1813–1873). The 40-year-old Scottish missionary received his medical degree from the Faculty of Physicians & Surgeons, Glasgow. The much publicized meeting with Sir Henry Morton Stanley in Ujiji, Tanganyika (now Tanzania) took place after eighteen more years of exploration and research.^{18,28}

A 380-page monograph entitled “On the Structure and Use of the Spleen” won the Astley Cooper prize and another paper was published in the *Medico-Chirurgical Proceedings*. Then the author, Henry Gray, FRS, FRCS wrote the *Anatomy of the Human Body* before he died of smallpox in 1861 at the age of 34.²⁹ One should recognize that the established concept of planned and organized sorting of civilian or military mass casualties had certainly not been the 1853 standard of practice. Beebe and Clegg stated that in “the wrecks of the ‘forties and fifties’ . . . few passengers emerged from collisions or derailments merely maimed.”³⁰ Jonathan Letterman (1824–1872), as Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac, would develop the technique known as triage (from the French: *trier* to

sort).³¹ The management of casualties is still being improved and refined from primary field locations to major trauma centers.³²

The Event

Parallels in history resemble our image of the parallel lines of railroad tracks—both are marred from time-to-time—but they persist and even shine in places we do not often see or remember.³³ *Danger Ahead*, the current Internet site that specializes in historic railway disasters, describes the first-ever fatality on a passenger railway at Parkside, UK.³⁴ William Huskisson, Member of Parliament, died on 15 September 1830 as a result of wounds sustained when a locomotive (The Rocket) struck him on the Liverpool & Manchester Railway seventeen miles from Liverpool. Documentation, such as that just cited, provides a fragmentary sense of the vast amount of historical information that may be found on the subject of railroads, train accidents, and related human factors. Hardly a day or month passes without reports concerning rail incidents around the world.^{35, 36} Furthermore, the families and the general public know the results, almost instantaneously in all media formats. Details regarding worldwide or Con-



Gurdon Wadsworth Russell, M.D.

circa 1897

from the Library of the Hartford Medical Society

necticut incidents, cost data, safety considerations, liability claim issues, and statistics exceed the limitations of the commentary.

The first signs of Connecticut's railroad system, according to Bingham's *History of Connecticut*, emerged with the completion of the New York & New Haven line in 1848.³⁷ So, it must have been with a great deal of excitement that passengers boarded the train (at 8:00 am.) that was said to have been a fast, new one recently put on the New York to Boston run by the New York & New Haven Railroad. Dr. Russell and other physicians were returning from the Sixth Annual Meeting of the American Medical Association in New York.^{38,39} That meeting had begun on Tuesday, 3 May 1853 at the Bleeker Street Presbyterian Church. In his account of the event, Dr. Russell refers to Dr. Archibald Welch.⁴⁰ He received his honorary M.D. degree from Yale in 1836 though prior to that he belonged to the Windham County Medical Association (1825) and the Hartford County Medical Association (1833). In 1846, Dr. Welch of Wethersfield, was President of the Connecticut State Medical Society.^{5,39}

Welch was one of at least seven physicians who were killed. Russell could be counted among the pallbearers representing the Hartford Medical Society.⁴

Richard Hooker, the historian, suggests that Dr. Russell's account may have been the first personal interview reporting on a major event and printed in any Hartford newspaper.³ Furthermore, it is believed to be the very first eyewitness description by a physician at the scene of a major train disaster—Friday, 6 May 1853 at approximately 10:30 am. The article "The Accident at Norwalk" is quoted verbatim from a microfilm version of *The Hartford Daily Courant*, Saturday, 7 May 1853.⁴⁰

Dr. Gurdon W. Russell, of this city, who was a passenger on the train which met with such a terrible accident at Norwalk, has, at our request, hastily written the following statement which will be read with melancholy interest: Statement of Dr. Russell of this City—"Having been in cars at the time of the late sad affair at Norwalk, I give you the following particulars. The first thing that I noticed was a waving and jerking of the cars, not very severe, but enough to show that an accident of some kind had occurred. It was so different, however, from what I had supposed to be the case when cars are off from the track that I thought that they would soon be stopped and that we were safe. This was but for a moment, for the breaking of the glass and of the car showed that something terrible had already happened or was about to happen, for at this time I supposed that the one we occupied was the only car injured. There came then a shaking and a crash and a stop, and in a moment, the work was done. The front of the car and part of the side were broken out, and the floor had broken off just in front of me, one end resting on the bridge and the other on the cars in the water below. So sudden and rapid was the whole affair that we had but time for a moment's thought, and it was over. Helping up those on the inclined floor of the car, who it is believed were not seriously injured, we next went down to those in the water. It was evident that here were two cars full of passengers and that one had fallen on top of the other; the upper one was inclined on its side and evidently nearly filled with water. We immediately commenced taking out the inmates at the windows, and soon got out a large number, some injured, some bruised, and many, ah, far too many, dead.

Assisting here till my services seemed to be needed elsewhere, I left to aid in resuscitating those brought on shore. This was effected, as far as I can learn, in but one person, and excepting in those got out safely, the rest were dead.

These were, apparently, not killed in the majority of instance by bruises or severe blows, but presented all the symptoms of asphyxia from drowning, and were probably drowned at once, being confined and pressed by broken cars. Oh, what a melancholy scene that! Certainly forty perhaps fifty persons killed in an instant, without a moment's warning, in the full confidence of security. This had probably been more than equaled before in the number of its mangled, agonized, half-living bodies, for here death scarcely touched his victim but to secure him, but the shrieks of the terrified women and children, the supplications of those in the water below for succor, added to the horror that shot

through us as we glanced at the work of destruction, formed a scene and existed emotions which can never be forgotten.

The explanation of thankfulness to God for my preservation, was followed by thought of my narrow escape, which was pressed home upon me still more closely when I recognized lying among the dead, him for whom I had given up my seat in New York, and had taken the succeeding car, - he who had traveled from Georgia in safety so far, with the seeds of disease so implanted in him that it was doubtful if he could reach home, was taken, and I was left, and then the remembrance of that solemn supplication in the litany, "From battle and murder, and from sudden death, good Lord deliver us." Following upon this were thoughts of home and its happy inmates; that I had been in the bottom of the wreck, what wretchedness, what darkness had been there, and yet the same that I pictured for myself will be felt in many families, and my sympathy was turned to them.

About half hour after this, word was brought to me that Dr. Welch was among the dead. This I could scarcely credit, as I had not seen him in the cars at starting, and as we had been much together in New York, I thought I should have noticed him, had he been present; nor had I seen him amongst the dead—and so, I concluded that he remained behind until afternoon. But he was dead—that was evident at the first glance and though I did not refrain from my efforts at resuscitation, I could have but the faintest hope of success, for medical men know to be true, what is contrary to the general impression, that but a few minutes of complete submersion in water is sufficient to produce death. When I last saw him the evening before in that happy, festive gathering, so full of animation, little did he, nor I, or anyone, suspect such an unhappy termination of that happy scene: how deeply do I, as must the whole community, sympathize with that unhappy family in this sudden affliction.

I will not say that this accident happened in this way, for I can use not such terms as this, nor will I take it upon me at this time to use a much harsher expression, but as near as I know of myself, and can learn from others, will state the occurrence. As I have said before, I knew of nothing unusual until the waving, uneasy motion of the car: there was no apparent slackening of the speed, nor, as I remember, anything leading to the inference that we were near a draw—this was the express train, and had left New York at 8:00 o'clock in the morning; turning a sudden curve, where it was, it is said, impossible to have stopped, it was in a moment plunged through the open draw into the water and mud below; first the locomotive and tender, then the baggage car, in which were five or six persons who were saved, and which fell upon the locomotive, and then a passenger car, and then another upon this, and then another, which fell over, broke in half. Two full passenger cars were thus in the water, and a third in part resting upon them. As it was high tide, the water was said to be from nine to twelve feet in depth, and I should judge the distance from the bridge to the water to be as much as fifteen or eighteen feet. Two cars remained behind, uninjured. Such was the impetus of the train, that the locomotive in passing, struck, it is said, or nearly struck the opposite pier. The engineer jumped off just before the plunge, and it is reported is not much injured. The draw was open for the purpose of letting through a steamboat, which, itself full of passengers, narrowly escaped being crushed.

Now the question which first arises, and which everyone very naturally asks is this, "Upon whom rests the blame?" Without intention of prejudging anyone, there can be no objection to stating here what has been stated elsewhere. Mr. Ferre in his testimony before the inquest said he was in a small boat about leaving for the purpose of hunting; the draw was opened for the steamboat; that the ball had been dropped at least ten minutes; this is the signal, a large red ball, which can be seen at the distance of half mile, but which is not plainly seen nearby, and when down signifies that the draw is open. He thinks the drawmaster not to blame at all, for the ball must have been down for ten minutes, and that whoever had charge of the train is mainly liable for the accident which occurred—that the cars came along at a strong speed—that the locomotive went across against the pier, and that the cars as they went off were crushed together like eggs. He had a full view of the whole affair, and, in his opinion, the engineer was the man who is to blame. In justice to the engineer, it should be stated that he is reported to say, for I have not seen him, that the ball was up; meaning that the draw was closed, and that there was no danger. The truth in the case will soon appear, but the above is as much as I could learn at the time. This occurred at a little past ten, and between ten and three, a train was enabled to pass the draw. The conductor, Mr. Comstock, was in one of the forward cars, and was considerably injured about the head and body, but not, apparently, seriously.

Just before we left, I counted thirty-eight dead bodies,—men, women, and children,—two more, it was said, were dead, and more were seen in the water and mud. Many physicians were returning from the medical meeting in New York; as many as six are dead; perhaps 15 or 20 were in the train; more of them would have been on had they not delayed until afternoon, or the next day; the loss falls heavily upon them, and taken away very worthy men. Mr. Burrall, the President of the road, soon came up from New York and with other officers rendered all possible assistance...."

There are no known follow-up accounts by Russell in the medical literature or his later writings. Other newspaper dispatches; eg, *Illustrated News*, were published on the same or subsequent dates and research into the outcomes or results of investigations will be left to future historical researchers.⁴¹ Two drawings from *Illustrated News* appear in Figs. 1 and 2. They are said to afford "truthful and spirited representations of the scene."⁴¹ Daguerreotypes of the event have not been discovered. With the benefit of accounts by Turner and Jacobus, Shaw, and others, the essential elements of accident are summarized (Table 1).^{36,40,42-46} At this time, the Internet site, *Danger Ahead* does not annotate the accident.³⁴ With the advent and rapid advances of electronic media over the past decade, an abundance of information and resource materials exists pertaining to all aspects of railroad history, museum collections, safety, and international developments. However, one wonders whether the written words and the profound emotions, as expressed by Dr. Russell or others, will ever be as eloquently delivered.

Table 1.—Summary of May 6, 1853 Railroad Accident Data

Location: Norwalk, Connecticut 300 yards from RR depot
Date: May 6, 1853 approximately 10:30–11:00 am.
Railroad: New York and New Haven RR express en route to Boston
Cause: Passenger train, 15–25 mph through open drawbridge
South Norwalk Bridge height above water level: approximately 25 feet
Water depth: Eight to 12 feet at inlet of Long Island Sound; full tide
Total Number of Passengers/Employees on board: about 150
Number of deaths: estimates range from 46–52
Primary cause of death: drowning (asphyxiation) in submerged cars
Numbers and types of injuries: estimated 20–30: many listed as “slightly” to “seriously” hurt; one near drowning; one dislocated shoulder; one dislocated wrist; one fracture of ankle; five facial injuries; other nonspecific injuries
Negligence: attributed to NY & NH RR substitute engineer’s failure to observe signal (a red ball) indicating an open drawbridge
Claim settlements: \$290,000 (est.) paid by May 19, 1855

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