

## 7a Baptiste (Jeannette's) Creek Wreck

This wreck, that occurred in the early hours of October 27, 1854, was the first of three serious accidents that befell the fledgling Great Western Railway (GWR) in its early years. The GWR was rushed "to completion" in its bid for the lucrative US border-to-border traffic through southern Ontario, and this railway remained notorious for its accident record.

On the previous evening, a GWR express had left the Niagara River Bridge on a westbound run. The train consisted of a combined mail and express car, a baggage car, two second-class coaches and four first class coaches. The train had been subjected to various delays, and at 5 am, running seven hours late, it approached the bridge over Baptiste Creek, some 15 miles west of Chatham, when it smashed into a 15 car gravel train that was backing towards it on the main line. Only the last coach escaped major damage, all others were close to pulverized.

It was Canada's first major train wreck, by official count leaving 52 people dead, although in the terrible carnage there may have been some unaccounted-for among the many emigrants heading for the USA in the second-class cars. The exact number of injured was not established, but reports ranged from 48 to 60.

At the coroner's inquest, attention naturally focused on the conductor and engineer of the gravel train. The first jury panel could not come to a consensus, and a second one was empanelled. The gravel train's conductor and engineer were charged with manslaughter for taking their train out in a dense fog and failing to inform themselves of the whereabouts of the express, and the railway company was censured for not keeping watchmen at switches and crossings. The conductor and engineer were imprisoned pending trial, but the outcome is not known.

With information from *Wreck! Canada's Worst Railway Accidents*, by Hugh A. Halliday, Robin Brass Studio, Toronto Ont. 1997.