

Ghost Trains, Real Trains, Three Asheville Firefighters Killed in 1891

As numerous news agencies reported last week, one person was killed and another injured on a railroad trestle in Iredell County. They and ten others were hunting for a "ghost train" about two miles west of Statesville. They were struck at 2:45 a.m., when a real train rounded a curve on Bostian's Bridge over Third Creek. Most were able to jump clear. A 29-year-old man was struck and died on scene, having been thrown to the bottom of the 100-foot ravine. Before he was struck, he pushed a woman to safety. She fell 30 to 40 feet and was airlifted to Carolinas Medical Center.



As news reports recounted, the group did not immediately react to the oncoming train. They thought the thing was an apparition. The accident happened on August 27, which is the anniversary of a deadly derailment that killed 25 people at the same site over 100 years ago. Legend has that a "ghost train" makes appearances on the tracks, and that you can hear the sounds of grinding metal and screaming passengers, as well as witness a watchman's lantern. [WRAL recounted the legend last year](#). But did you know that six Asheville firefighters were aboard that day, and three were killed?



Credit retired Durham Fire Department Capt. Chuck Milligan, a historian who [researched much of the state's fire service history](#), for reminding Mr. Blogger of this incident. He also passed along copies of original newspaper articles.

On August 27, 1891, a passenger train leaving Statesville plunged from an iron trestle over Third Creek. The steam locomotive, tender, baggage and second class coach car, first class coach car, Pullman sleeping car, and a private car dropped 65 to 75 feet. Twenty people were killed immediately, nine were seriously injured, and some 20 suffered minor injuries.

The final death toll would number 25. As the above image shows, the wooden railroad cars practically disintegrated upon impact. The accident was caused by what newspapers called "spread of rails." The bridge wasn't damaged in the accident! The below drawing accompanied the newspaper account printed in the Statesville *Landmark* that day.



This is incorrect. The third firefighter killed was Charles Barnett.

Six members of the Asheville Fire Department were aboard Passenger Train No. 9. They were returning early from the state fireman's tournament in Durham, Milligan notes, as rain had ruined the tournament. Firefighters Perry Barnett, Samuel Gorman, and W. E. Winslow were killed, while Firefighters Will Bradford, John Gaze, Marshall Nix were slightly wounded. The bodies of the deceased firefighters were embalmed the next day by morticians from Charlotte and Durham, and were returned to Asheville on a 1:52 a.m. train on August 29.

The Durham meeting of the North Carolina State Fireman's Association, along with the annual tournament, was held August 25-27. The Bostian's Bridge accident ranks as the third deadliest rail crash in North Carolina history, behind the 29 people killed in Hamlet in 1906, and the 74 people killed in Rennert in 1943.

Sources:

- [Bostian's Bridge, NC Train Disaster, August 1891](#)
- *The Democrat* (Asheville), September 3, 10, 1891
- *Durham Herald?*, August 29, 1891
- [North Carolina Deadliest Disasters](#)
- [North Carolina Firefighter Convention Cities and Dates](#)
- [State Firemen's Convention newspaper clippings, 1890-1899](#)
- Various news reports

<http://www.legeros.com/ralwake/photos/weblog/pivot/entry.php?id=3600>

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