

Charles W. Grigsby

(- 8 Apr 1904)

Grigsby. On Friday, April 8, 1904 at 12 noon at the Emergency Hospital, Charles W., the youngest son of Bushrod T. and the late Maria E. Grigsby in the 27th year of his age. May he rest in peace. Funeral from his sister's (Mrs. Phillips) residence, 813 4 1/2 street southwest on Monday April 11 at 2 p.m. Relatives and friends respectfully invited to attend.

The Evening Star, April 8, 1904, p. 1

Meet Horrible Death

Four Men Victims of Explosion and Fire

Bodies Badly Burned

Accident at Pintsch Gas Works This Morning

Cause Not Yet Ascertained

One Injured Man Dies in Emergency Hospital

The bodies of three victims of an explosion and fire were removed to the morgue this morning from the plant of the Pintsch Gas Company, at 13 ½ and E streets southwest, and a fourth man was removed to the Emergency Hospital suffering from burns, which subsequently proved fatal. The explosion occurred at about 4:35 o'clock, and not a man who was in the engine room at the time escaped its force, all failing to escape before the flames had done their deadly work. The dead are Joseph Cumberland, Stephen Henson and an unidentified colored man. Charles Grigsby was the one conveyed to the hospital. Henson was the engineer in charge of the engine room this morning and Cumberland was his fireman. Grigsby was employed as an extra helper. There were other men employed in the building at the time, but they were not in the engine room, and were therefore not injured. Warren Horstman was just outside the engine room and the force of the shock threw him down, but he jumped to his feet and ran to a point where he was safe from the blaze.

What caused the explosion no one seems to know. Mr. G.H. Reilley, superintendent of the works, says he has no idea of the cause. If anybody did know the cause it was one of those who had been killed. Mr. Reilley was at home when the accident occurred, but he reached the building shortly afterward and had a force of men at work clearing away the debris. Besides the damage to the engine, the south wall of the second story of the building was blown out, causing the damage that can hardly be repaired in less than a week's time. While the repairs are being made the cars will get their supply of gas from the Baltimore plant. A new plant is now being erected between Brookland and Eckington and will be in operation about the first part of September. Pipe lines run from this plant to the depots and New Jersey avenue yard, and many of the buoys along the Potomac river received their supply of gas there.

Plant Run Night and Day

Because of the immense amount of gas the local plant is required to furnish, the work in the building has been carried on night and day. Those who were on duty at the time the explosion occurred had been there all night. Henson, Cumberland and Grigsby were on duty in the engine room, while the others were in the boiler room, or just outside the building. Horstman's duties called him outside, and, he saw the colored man when he appeared. The latter stopped at the door and was standing there with his hands resting against the facings when there came the flash which was followed by a loud report and the falling of the upper portion of the south wall. The colored spectator had not been there more than a

minute when he was blown ten or fifteen feet away. He was not thrown far enough away, however, to put him out of reach of the flames, and he was burned to death. When his charred body was picked up there was just enough skin left on his body to tell his color. His clothing had been burned completely from him, but one shoe had not been destroyed. His body was picked up in front of the engine room.

Horribly Burned

Grigsby, who was taken to the hospital, where he died, was in the small engine room with his fellow workmen. His clothing caught fire, but he managed to get outside the structure. His clothing was naturally saturated with oil and grease, and it was practically impossible for him to prevent inhaling the flame. When he reached the outside of the building there was a colored man there, who threw a blanket about the form of the man, who was fast burning to death, and extinguished the flames. Grigsby was unconscious and those who gathered about the scene of the fire did all in their power to ease his pain until the arrival of the ambulance, when he was hurried to the hospital. Dr. White took him to the emergency room when the hospital was reached, he was placed in a ward, his death resulting about 12 o'clock.

Policemen from the fourth precinct reached the scene of the fire a short time after the explosion occurred, and several companies of the fire department responded to an alarm turned in from box 417.

Very Hot Fire

The task of the firemen was a dangerous one because of the close proximity of the big gasometer and the presence of oils and other inflammable material in the building. It was only hard and courageous work on the part of the firemen that prevented loss of additional lives, and also prevented the destruction of the entire building. The firemen succeeded in a short time in extinguishing the flames and returned to their quarters when all danger of further trouble had passed.

The force of the explosion had aroused many people living in the vicinity of the north end of the Long bridge and was felt by residents of Virginia. Despite the early morning hour at which the accident occurred several hundred people soon gathered. Women feared they had been deprived of their husbands, and parents were on hand to make certain that their sons had not been burned to death. Some men who belonged to the force on duty last night had been excused, and their friends and relatives feared they had been burned to death, as they knew nothing of their having taken a night off.

During the entire forenoon relatives of men in the employ of the company called at the wrecked building and made anxious inquiries. One who called was Miss Cumberland, sister of one of the victims, but she was unable to get information about her brother. From the scene of the fire she went to the morgue and asked for permission to see the bodies. She was not certain that one of them was that of her brother and she felt she would be better satisfied if she could see it.

"I would rather you would not go in the morgue," the superintendent told her. "The bodies are not in condition for anybody to see. If you have any male relatives or friends they might look at the body for you."

Friends View the Remains

Just then two friends of Cumberland and Henson called.

They were admitted to the morgue and they identified the body of Henson. This identification made it certain that the other body was that of Cumberland. A number of friends of both dead workmen called at the morgue during the day, but only a few of them were admitted. There was no reason for exhibiting the body of the colored man, for there was nothing about his remains which would assist in the work of identification. The shoe taken from one foot, the superintendent of the morgue stated, can be identified. There was a suspender buckle on the body, but it is of common pattern and will probably be of no help in the matter of getting the body identified.

Coroner Nevitt was informed of the horrible affair and visited the building early this morning. He saw several men employed about the gas plant and questioned them, but was unable to ascertain anything to give him an idea of the cause of the explosion. The coroner decided to hold an inquest to have a jury pass upon the affair. The hearing will be held at the sixth precinct police station, Monday morning at 10 o'clock.

Horstman's Story

Warren Horstman, who had so narrow an escape, was seen by a Star reporter this morning. He had hardly recovered from his fright. All he was able to tell was that he was knocked down and that he ran as fast as he could when he regained his feet. He saw the colored visitor when he stopped at the door. The colored man, he said, was not there more than a minute when the explosion occurred. Mr. Horstman said he had no idea what caused the explosion.

Mr. Reilley, superintendent of the plant, made a similar statement regarding the cause of the explosion. He said he had been unable to find anything about the building to indicate what had occasioned it. Workmen, he said, are not permitted to smoke in the building, and so far as he knew the machinery was in perfect condition.

A number of small boys gathered about the building this morning and picked over the pile of debris for souvenirs. They carried off small bolts, nails, screws and even some of the smaller tools from the engine room. Occasionally one of them would make a ghastly find in the shape of a bone or something from one of the bodies of the victims.

The police remained about the building during the morning.

The death of Grigsby was a peculiarly sad one. Relatives and friends had called at the hospital during the morning to see him, and his wife and child were at his side when death claimed him. Miss Cumberland, who had called in the belief that the man under treatment was her brother, was admitted to the room. The patient was asleep when she called, and when she had satisfied herself that he was not her brother, she went to the morgue. Relatives of the victims sought to obtain their bodies this afternoon to have them prepared for burial and the coroner granted the requests. This was done by swearing a jury over the body of Stephen Henson, and the adjourning the hearing.

Chief Belt's Report

Chief Engineer William T. Belt this afternoon submitted to Commissioner Macfarland, who has supervision over the fire department, a report relative to the fire and explosion of gas at the Pintsch Gas Company's plant at 13 ½ and E streets southwest. Chief Belt mentions in his report the fatalities resulting and the injuries sustained by Charles Griggsby and added "The casualties occurred as a result of the explosion of the gas, which happened before the alarm was sounded."

Chief Belt states that the damage to the machinery and building amounted to about \$2,000. In closing his report the chief says:

"The department has responded on several occasions to fires in this plant and it has always been considered by the department as extremely hazardous in case of fire."

Commissioner MacFarland requested Chief Belt to explain his note to the effect that the plant is "extremely hazardous." Chief Belt stated that all the regulation have been complied with by the company, but that from the nature of the business there is danger to the employees working about the building. The danger from explosions and fire at the plant are not imminent to the public, but only to the employees of the company in the building.

Commissioner MacFarland expressed regret at the unfortunate disaster and stated that he will look into the matter to see if any further precautions can be provided for the safety of those employed in the building.

The Evening Star, April 9, 1904, p. 15

Pintsch Gas Inquiry

Inquest to Be Held by Coroner Monday Morning

An inquest is to be held Monday morning in the case of the four victims of the explosion yesterday at the plant of the Pintsch Gas Company.

Charles Henderson's body was turned over to Undertaker Wheatley of Alexandria and taken to that city for interment.

Undertaker Bradley took the body of Charles W. Grigsby from the morgue to the home of his sister, 813 4 1/2 street southwest, last night. His funeral will take place Monday.

Joseph Cumberland's body was removed to Lee's undertaking establishment and prepared for burial. Later the body was taken to the home of a sister of the deceased, at 48 Rhode Island avenue. His funeral will take place from St. Martin's Church Monday morning.

The Evening Star, April 11, 1904, p. 13

Employees Blamed

Coroner's Verdict Regarding Pintsch Gas Explosion

Was Lack of Caution

Engineer's Death Prime Cause of Investigation

Many Witnesses Examined by Jury This Morning --

Gasometer Pumped Almost Free of Gas

After a delay of three-quarters of an hour waiting for witnesses, inquiry was begun by Coroner Nevitt and a jury at 10:45 o'clock this morning at No. 6 police precinct to determine the cause of the explosion at the Pintsch gas works, 13 1/2 and E streets southwest, early last Friday morning, which resulted in the death of Stephen Henderson, of Alexandria, Joseph Cumberland, Charles W. Grigsby and an unidentified colored man.

After hearing a number of witnesses and after deliberating ten minutes the jury this afternoon decided that the explosion at the Pintsch gas works was "due to lack of caution on the part of the employees in charge of the plant at the time of the accident."

It will be recalled that Friday morning, April 9, at about 4:35 o'clock, a tremendous explosion occurred in the boiler room of the southern portion of the Pintsch gas works, fronting on Water street, which resulted in the destruction of life and of the entire purification plant by fire, which immediately started. Henderson, Cumberland and the unidentified negro were in the engine room at the time when the explosion which resulted in their deaths occurred without warning. The men were chatting away pleasantly when a deafening report was heard and in a jiffy the entire plant was filled with flames and fumes of gas.

Henson was on the outside of the building and lost his life in an attempt to save the life of one of his coworkers.

The jury was composed of F.K. Raymond, Charles Jacobsen, C.E. Wood, F.S. Donaldson, Francis Reeside and J.F. Jarner, and a full and complete inquiry was begun.

The First Witness

Warren Horstman of 1242 Union street southwest, a survivor of the accident, was the first witness. He told of the explosion at the gas works, and said he was standing near the engine room door just before the explosion. He had been a round the plant all morning, and had been with the company two or three years. At the time of the actual explosion he was twenty-five or thirty feet from the building. Things were working all right, he said, and there was no suggestion of anything being out of repair. He

had seen the colored man before, but did not know him. The plant had not been shut down for repairs since the new engine was put in.

The witness' ideal of the cause of the accident was that a gasometer which holds gas was pumped too low. This, he said, was probably the fault of the engineer. When gas commenced to rise it overflowed. He thought it to be dangerous, and others tried to stop it. Witness made an effort to get Cumberland out, but he would not come so, fearing an explosion, he got out, after warning them of the danger. He couldn't get to Henderson to call him out. He had, he said, enough warning to get out, from his knowledge of conditions. They wanted him to come in, he added, but he saw there was danger, and declined.

Liquid was thrown in a four-foot stream when there should have been no liquid at all. The overflow of the gasometer, in his judgment, caused all the trouble.

Henderson, Grigsby and Cumberland were trying to cure the trouble in the gasometer. He knew there was a stoppage in a pipe by the showing of the gauge. The engineer and others were supposed to watch the gauge.

The explosion occurred fifteen minutes after the gauge indicated that something was wrong. He had never seen the indicator show trouble of a like nature before. It had, however, showed stoppage.

Henderson was in charge, and it was his duty to watch the gasometer. Before the explosion Cumberland was pulled out, but went back. Witness believed Henderson was overcome by gas. When Cumberland got out he appeared dazed, and wanted to get back to remedy the trouble with the leakage.

The explosion occurred three minutes after Cumberland went back. Witness thought he knew what was coming and ran. Floors were full of liquid at this time, and witness said he knew something was going to happen. The liquid was almost knee deep.

The explosion knocked witness fully fifteen feet. He got up and kept on running. Grigsby was running behind him in a blaze of fire. Grigsby dropped in the street and tried to roll himself on the ground to put out the flames.

When witness called attention to the leak he told those in authority and got away. If they had left sufficient gas in the gasometer the accident, in the opinion of the witness, could not have occurred.

Chas. H. Riley's Testimony

Charles H. Riley was next called. He is superintendent of the Pintsch Gas Company at Washington, in charge of the local plant.

"After an investigation of the accident," said Mr. Riley, "I went to the plant. I saw a blaze coming out of the engine room and tried to turn off the feed valves leading into the city. I noticed the walk was covered with the liquid which runs off from the gas, and recognized it as coming from the gasometer, which could only occur by reducing storage of gas in the gasometer."

The leakage, he said, must have been going on some time before it was noticed. When the gasometer is nearly exhausted there is an indicator with which the engineer was supposed to shut off the pump. Mr. Henderson, witness said, had been employed three months, and was a competent man and appreciated the dangers. Mr. Cumberland was also supposed to watch the gasometer. Cumberland was an expert gasmaker.

Mr. Henderson was one of our most valuable men. In the judgement of the witness the cause of the explosion was that the gasometer was "sucked too low" and water took its place and blew out water and oil and flooded land tried to shut it off, witness said, but was unsuccessful. The accident was caused by the engineer running pump too long, and the gas caught fire from exposed light outside of the building. There were no lights in the building.

There is no way to watch gas in a gasometer by mechanical means, the witness said. It takes a man to do it. The company is using the same appliances in the new works. The plant is safe and running

today. The only other accidents before at the plant were caused by carelessness. Nothing can happen when every man does his duty.

Railway Men as Witnesses

L.R. Jones was called. He stated he is a brakeman on the Pennsylvania railroad and said he was standing at a switch near the Pintsch gas plant. He saw the flash and heard a report. The concussion threw him down. He got up and ran, and saw Grigsby run out with his clothing in flames. Witness did not see any other person run, but noticed an unusual smell of gas. He noticed nothing unusual about the building, but ran to fire alarm box and turned in an alarm.

George M. Parrott, a Pennsylvania railway employee, heard the explosion and saw the fire and noticed the police and fire departments.

E.F. Vermillion, a local boiler inspector, told of an examination of the plant of the Pintsch gas plant last Friday morning. He found trouble in compressor room twenty-one feet away from the boilers. He believes the fire started from standpipe which was placed there to put water in the gasometer. Gas ignited by gas jet outside the window. The building was constructed in compliance with regulations. The boiler room was intact. Witness said the only substance that exudes is as explosive as gasoline.

Mr. Jones was of the opinion that the explosion was due entirely to the gasometer. This, he said, was shown by the gasometer itself, and if it had been properly watched by those in charge the explosion could not have occurred. The plant, he said, was always in good condition.

C.W. Somerville, a computer, testified that he could not say what caused the explosion. The building, he said, was in good shape before the explosion.

Among other witnesses called was Joseph H. Wilson. Mr. Wilson saw Grigsby, and attempted to put out the fire with which he was enveloped.

P.W. Nicholson, assistant to the fire marshal, thought the explosion was due to an accumulation of gases. There had been some trouble with pumps, he says, caused by stoppage probably from the tar in the pipes.

Coroner Glazebrook told of examining the body of Mr. Henderson. He found it, he said, badly disfigured, and there was a strong odor of gas about it. He was badly burned. He had been asphyxiated, the doctor said.