

## John W. Mead

( - 30 May 1877)

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*The Evening Star, Wednesday, May 30, 1877*

### **Frightful Disaster in Georgetown**

#### **The Outlet Lock Gives Way**

#### **Mr. J.W. Mead Killed and Two Men Injured**

A terrible and fatal accident occurred this morning at 10 o'clock at the new outlet lock, a mile above the Aqueduct bridge, in Georgetown, by which Mr. John W. Mead, assistant harbor master of the Chesapeake and Ohio canal, was instantly killed, and two employees – Sylvester Carroll, aged 17 years, and Michael Reynolds, aged 60 years, were severely if not fatally injured, the former having both legs broken and sustaining an injury to his left arm, and the latter having his right leg crushed below the knee. Carroll resides at Foxhall's place, near Green Springs, and Reynolds at the corner of 1<sup>st</sup> and Lingan streets, Georgetown.

#### *Particulars of the Accident*

The facts in the case, so far as they could be ascertained by our reporter, are as follows: A canal boat loaded with coal was passed into the caisson at this outlet, preparatory to being lowered into the river. The caisson is lowered on a railway and inclined plane at an angle of about thirty degrees, and for counter weight two cars loaded with two hundred and fifty tons of stone are placed on rails each side the caisson. As the caisson, loaded, goes down toward the river these cars ascend. Some slight signs of weakness were noticed in the machinery this morning while the caisson with its boat was being lowered, and the attention of the person in charge of the engine having been called to it, he immediately and suddenly brought the engine to a stop. It is supposed that this sudden stoppage caused an unnatural strain on the ropes, breaking them and precipitating the cars and caisson to the foot of the railways. The boat was not injured, and passed to the river with its occupants in safety. One of the cars in the descent struck Mr. Mead, who was walking behind it in its ascent, and when the ropes broke he had not time to get out of its course. It is supposed that the other sufferers were injured by the ropes, which were of 1-3/4 inch steel wire. The cars were completely demolished, and the entire machinery is more or less injured. Large cog-wheels of cast iron, bolts, rods and bars are scattered over the scene in great confusion.

The Body of Mr. Mead was recovered with difficulty, it being covered by the debris to a depth of four or five feet. His right leg was terribly mangled, and he had a severe cut penetrating the skull. He was injured internally.

Mr. Mead was an old and respected citizen of Capitol Hill, and with his family resided on 6th street, near B, southeast. He was an iron worker by trade, and for the past two or three years had been employed in the canal office at Georgetown and on the Georgetown division of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. He was about 55 years of age, and in old times was active in the volunteer fire department, and was also a member of the old Washington Light Infantry. He represented the fifth ward several times in the board of common council and for many years was assessor of the ward.

#### *Cause of the Accident*

It appears that a safety brake had been removed from the caissons several days since, and for some reason had not been replaced. Two boats passed in safety this morning through the outlet, and no cause is assigned for the accident which overtook the third boat.

## The Wounded Men

Michael Reynolds was sent to Providence Hospital and Sylvester Carroll was taken to his home. Both were attended by Dr. Ritchie. The accident will be a serious drawback to the company, as most of the machinery is completely wrecked.

*The Evening Star, May 31, 1877*

### **The Disaster at the Outlet Lock**

#### **Death of Another Victim**

Yesterday evening the scene of the Outlet Lock accident, noticed in The Star, was visited by large number of persons. The body of Mr. John W. Mead was taken to the third precinct station house, and Dr. Patterson, the coroner, after viewing it, directed the police to summon a jury to appear this evening. The young man, Sylvester Carroll, was removed to his father's residence, on the Foxall place and attended by Doctors Taylor, Lewis Mackrall, Bowie Taylor, Lewis Ritchie and James Mackall. After consultation it was decided that the only chance for his life lay in the amputation of both legs. One was taken off just above the ankle joint, and the other below the knee joint, but he survived the amputation only about one hour. Michael Reynolds was found to have sustained a compound fracture of the right leg, and severe injuries in the back. He was removed by Sanitary Officer Connell to the Providence hospital, where the amputation of the crushed leg was performed.

#### *The Cause of the Accident*

Mr. City, the engineer in charge, gives the following account of the accident. A few minutes before the accident occurred his attention was called by the peculiar motion of the brace between two of the sheaves, (wheels around which is the heavy iron chain works), but could not detect the cause of the trouble. His assistant, seeing his movement, and fearing something was wrong, began gradually to shut off the water, so that there was no sudden stoppage of the engine, nor was the iron rope broken at all, nor is it broken at the present time. Mr. City says he is also prepared to prove that the absence of the safety shoe brake was not the cause of the accident; because the shoebrake was by experiment found entirely inadequate to stop the counter weights if they had a start of only a few feet. It was only of value in case the weight jumped backwards--it was therefore abandoned--and in its stead men with chocks followed the weights, which work two of the men were doing at the time of the accident. It may then be asked why did they not stop the weights? The iron rope which pulls up the caisson, weights, etc., works around three large sheaves, (wheels,) which are fastened by heavy plates in solid masonry. This masonry, which fastened the journal of the wheel, broke first, the canting of that caused the rope to jump to the next smaller wheel, and when the rope struck the smaller wheel it broke it, and tore it away from the masonry. This made a slack rope--the weights then went at full speed beyond the power of the men whose duty it was to chock the weights. The cause then of the accident was either a weak plate in the wheel, which is fastened in the masonry, or a defect in the masonry itself.

#### *Remarkable Presence of Mind*

Many have asked, very sensibly, why it was that the canal boat and its occupants in the caisson escaped? It was all owing to the presence of mind of an employee at the lock, Mr. John W. Carroll, who, before the actual occurring of the catastrophe, seemed to know what was coming, and without any orders opened the gate of the caisson, and when the shock came the rebound shoved the boat on safely out into the river. The caisson was much strained and bent. This lock was built by Mr. H.A. Ramsey & Co. The coroner at half-past one o'clock went to the lock, and upon his return an inquest will be held at the station house.

*The Evening Star, Friday, June 1, 1877*

## **The Outlet Lock Disaster**

### **Death of the Third Victim of the Tragedy**

Michael Reynolds, who was injured by the disaster at the outlet lock in Georgetown Wednesday, and was taken to Providence hospital for treatment, died there yesterday, making the third victim of the accident.

The Coroner's inquest over the body of Mr. J.W. Mead, who was killed outright by the accident (Sylvester Carroll, the second victim, died Wednesday night) was commenced at 1 o'clock yesterday, at the police station in Georgetown.

The first witness--Mr. Henry W. Denmead, superintendent of the canal company at the lock, testified that he had orders to assist Mr. City; that he turned over all the men at his disposal, and notified them that they were under the orders of Mr. City, who proceeded with the work, and put the first and second boats safely through the lock. The accident occurred on letting the third one through. Witness first noticed the unusual speed of the cables, and he made a remark about it to Mr. Mead, who was with him, and expressed his belief that something was wrong. Mr. Mead stepped on the counter-weight track, and witness caught hold of him and pulled him back to the main track, saying it was the safest place to be. Mr. Mead again stepped on the counter track, when witness again pulled him back, saying at the same time, "for God's sake, stay here." Witness was struck on the finger by a piece of flying material, and turning to see what it was, let go his hold on Mead and lost sight of him; next saw the rope throwing young Carroll against the counter weight, which knocked him down; saw Reynolds struck by the same rope; the counter rope sunk under Carroll, and the accident was all over; believes that the breaking of the keeper was the cause of the accident; as a machinist and mechanic he thought the wheels sufficiently strong; had the keeper been of wrought iron it would have lessened the chances of accident; the breaks had been used, but were taken off; had they been on they would have prevented the accident; the counter weights are about two hundred tons in weight, and the caisson and boat weigh about the same.

Mr. C.W. City, the superintendent of the contractors, testified that he was employed by H.A. Ramsey & Co., and was in charge at the time of the accident; was near the wheels (sheafs) at the time of the accident, and observed that the brace was vibrating more than it had ever done previously; as two journals of the sheaves had broken previously, he naturally looked for similar accidents; the great sudden jar was what caused the accident; had the bases been braced at the bottom the accident might have been avoided; as a machinist, witness considered it necessary to watch those large sheaves closely; on account of accidents having happened he was naturally suspicious; Mr. Ramsey had the contract for the work, but had been told there was nothing to be done without consulting Mr. Hutton, the chief engineer of the canal company; there had been no conflict between Mr. Hutton and witness; he took the brakes off about three weeks ago; Mr. Ramsey was present; it was a perfect Godsend that the brakes were not on; had they been on, the caisson would have been ruined and every one on the boat and caisson would have been injured; the brakes would have ripped out and would not have stopped the counter-weight trucks. Adjourned until this afternoon.

*The Evening Star, Saturday, June 2, 1877*

The Funeral of John W. Mead, who was killed by the outlet lock accident on Wednesday, took place from his late residence on Capitol Hill yesterday and was attended by an immense concourse of citizens, among them Col. J.G. Berret and other officers, and employees of the C. and O. Canal Co., many of the members of the old Light Infantry and the citizens of East Washington generally. The services were conducted by Rev. John Chester, and the interment was made at Congressional cemetery.