

Thomas W. Roberts (- 13 Jul 1898)

The Evening Star, July 11, 1898

Crash Causes Death

One Passenger Killed and a Number Injured in Smashup

Electric Car Rushes Down Incline

Breaking of Chain Works Disaster on Capital Railway

Killed and Injured

Car No. 4 on the Capital Railway line became disabled about 9:30 o'clock last night at the top of the asylum hill by the breaking of a chain attached to the brake and the car ran down the hill at a frightful rate of speed crashing into an Anacostia horse car at the foot of the hill, smashing a trolley pole and awning post and finally coming to a stop at Nichols and Howard avenues. One passenger was killed and about three dozen people were more or less injured. Some of them were seriously hurt, and one or two may die. Motorman Arthur Shelly did all he could with the electric current, and when the bottom of the hill was reached and an accident could not be avoided he jumped from the platform and escaped injury. Conductor J.W. Werner remained aboard until the collision occurred, but also escaped injury.

As soon as the accident happened there were telephone messages sent in all directions for doctors and ambulances. The police reserves were called out, and in a short time the wounded were being cared for either in the hospitals or at their homes. Some few were kept in houses near the scene of the accident and were given medical treatment.

Crowded With Passengers

The Capital Railway Company uses the overhead trolley system south of the Anacostia bridge. When car No. 4 left Congress Heights, some minutes after 9 o'clock last night, there were many passengers aboard, including men, women and children. Many of them had spent the day in the woods and were returning home. Just after passing the gate of the government hospital for the insane passengers on the car heard a rumbling noise, but just what it was they, of course, did not know. The motorman understood very well what the trouble was, and gave the conductor a signal of warning. The car was then going at terrific speed, and the conductor made his way to the rear platform and used every effort to apply the brake, but was powerless to check the car. When the passengers realized that a smash-up was unavoidable they began jumping from the runaway vehicle, and in this way several were injured, while others managed to escape unhurt. Driver Roger Barker of the Anacostia streetcar line had his car on the turntable, near Douglass Hall, and had not finished turning the car, when his attention was attracted to the electric car, then thundering down the hill. While he believed that the saving of his horses and car was impossible, he made an effort to get the animals loose. An instant before the crash came he deserted his team and jumped to the sidewalk, reaching there in time to save his life.

Witnessed the Destruction

Standing there on the sidewalk the driver saw his car demolished and his horses so frightfully cut up that that it was necessary to end their sufferings soon afterward. The heavy electric car jumped the track just before the switch and turntable were reached, but did not clear the little horse car. This vehicle was struck on the end, and so great was the force that it was smashed and splintered and thrown in a mass on the sidewalk. The fatally injured horses were also thrown on the pile of debris.

Moving on as if it were going to tear through the houses on the street the electric car struck the curbstone and an iron trolley pole about the same time. This changed the course of the runaway, and instead of going through it continued along the line of the curb, taking an awning post from in front of W.E. Gale's drug store and finally stopping at Howard avenue. Here the collapse of the car was almost complete, and the passengers were imprisoned by the falling of the roof and uprights.

Driver Barker of the Anacostia line and Conductor Werner, who had gotten off the damaged car at the last minute, were among the first to begin the work of rescuing the passengers. Women and children in the car were screaming and shrieking. Some of the passengers had received broken legs, arms or ribs; some had been cut about the head and body, while still others had received internal injuries which caused severe suffering and endangers their lives.

Adds to the Horror

The sight of blood on so many of the victims added to the horror of the situation, and frightened some of the women and children who had really not been injured to any great extent. The noise made by the smashing of the cars and the outcries made by the frightened passengers attracted people from points several squares distant, and there was soon a big crowd on the street. Many of them were of assistance to the injured ones, for they were scattered along Nichols avenue from near the top of the hill to Howard avenue, where the car finally came to a standstill. Some of those who had jumped had received injuries which rendered them unable to make their way to the foot of the hill, while those who had not been so badly hurt assisted them as best they could. Physicians and ambulances were in great demand, and the doctors at the insane asylum were quick to respond to a call. Dr. Stewart Harrison of Anacostia and Dr. W.E. Gales of Hillisdale were also soon on hand. Police patrol wagons from several of the stations, as well as hospital and police ambulances, were called out to remove the injured. Wagons in Hillisdale were also pressed into service and after some little time the more seriously injured passengers were in the hospitals, while others were patched up by the doctors and sent to their homes.

The people of Hillisdale and Anacostia did all in their power to assist the victims of the accident. Several houses were thrown open and converted into hospitals, and there was no one who refused to go for medicines and render other help.

Women and Children in Wreck

Among those who remained in the car until the final crash came were a number of children and women, and not many of them were seriously hurt. When the rescuers removed several of the heavier pieces of broken timbers and the roof these passengers were found in all sorts of positions--some of them at full length on the car floor, while others were in kneeling posture, and still others had remained on the seats. In the midst of all the confusion and suffering a little dog that had evidently been on the car with one of the passengers emerged from the wreck. The animal was a little disfigured, but did not appear very much frightened, and would not be driven from the wreck until its owner was signed.

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At Providence Hospital

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T.W. Roberts, fifty-six years old, Baltimore and Ohio railroad agent at Anacostia, was also taken to Providence Hospital. He was injured about the head, and his condition this morning was serious.

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The Motorman's Story

Arthur Selby, the motorman, this morning gave the following version of the affair:

"When I started down grade I attempted to put the brake on, and when I heard the brake chain snap I gave the conductor three bells as a signal to put on the rear brake. The current was, of course, off at the time. I pulled the reverse lever, intending to try and run the car backward, but the lever failed to work, because, I suppose, of the car's momentum and heavy load of passengers. There must have been 130 people on board. The people were jumping off all the way down the hill.

"There were comparatively few persons on the car when the collision came. The car jumped the curved track at the bottom of the hill. They tell me that the conductor succeeded in putting on the rear brake, but that it was too late and it failed to work.

"I left the car just before the collision. I was rendered senseless by the leap and did not revive for fifteen minutes. It was all over then except the caring for the wounded."

Conductor's Version

Conductor J.W. Werner was also seen this morning. He stated that he had succeeded in putting on the rear brake, but that it did not work. He was in the car when it came to a standstill, having been caught under some debris. He crawled out and assisted in helping the injured.

Mr. Edward Stephenson, with his wife and family were on the runaway electric car. Mr. Stephenson hardly knows how they escaped death or injury, but they were not hurt. He assisted in holding up the roof of the car and prevented some women from trying to leap out.

Policeman Buckmaster, who witnessed the accident said:

"It was all over quicker than it takes to tell it. I looked up the street, and heard the people screaming and then came the crash when the cars came together. The electric car came rushing across the street, and the roof was splintered in the shock against the trolley pole."

Many persons were hurt whose names could not be learned. Others who were but slightly hurt left the place in marriages. No person living in Anacostia was hurt except, Mr. Roberts.

The Evening Star, July 11, 1898

Chain Did Not Break

Allegation of Witness to Capital Railway Accident

Says the Car Was Overcrowded

Also That Conductor and Motorman Both Jumped Off

The Coroner's Inquiry

The body of the man killed in the accident on the Capital railway last night was removed this afternoon to the undertaking establishment of J.W. Lee, No. 332 Pennsylvania avenue, where an inquest was held by direction of Coroner Carr. There were several witnesses in attendance who had not been summoned among them a man who was interested in the operation of the brake on the car. The jury was composed of Alfred W. Wilson, Charles W. Downing, John Garner, Daniel C. Frahey, J.T. Fleishhamer and Edward R. Plant.

Deputy Coroner Glazebrook was the first witness examined. He performed the autopsy. He told of the many bruises he found about the man's head and body, as well as on his legs, and said that his pelvic bones were crushed. His bladder was ruptured, and death, he said, resulted from hemorrhage following the infliction of injuries.

Braxton L. Mohler, 511 6th street southeast, testified that he went over to Congress Heights last night in company with Mrs. Baldwin. They remained until the pictures were shown and started home about 9:30 o'clock. The car came at a moderate rate of speed for a while. Before the conductor finished loading the car he was told not to take any more passengers. A man not on the car seemed to be guiding the movements of the people. Just after the car started the speed, witness thought, was about eight or ten miles an hour.

When the last start was made the car was making a more rapid rate. When a down grade was reached the car was going at about 20 or 25 miles an hour, and when the asylum hill was reached witness realized that the car was beyond the motorman's control.

Number of Passengers

"I should say there were between 140 and 160 people on the car," said witness. "The passengers were packed in and out like sardines."

The witness said the claim had been made that the chain on the brake broke.

"That," he said, "is false, for the brake worked all down the hill."

Near the top of the hill, he said, the conductor "quietly jumped" and near the foot of the hill the motorman got off.

"Did you say both the motorman and conductor left the car before the collision occurred?" asked a juror.

"Yes, sir," he answered, "and a lady asked me why the conductor had left the car. I told her I thought he had been pushed off, as I did not want to alarm her."

What Examination Showed

Witness said he understood that an examination of the car made after the accident occurred showed that the chain under the car had broken. This may be true, he said, but he was positive that the brake worked down the hill.

Witness said he thought if the motorman and conductor had remained on the car they could have stopped it at the bottom of the hill and avoided the serious accident. There were seven women on the rear platform, and in witness' opinion no one touched the rear brake.

Conductor Wersler was called in and witness said he was not the man to whom he (witness) had referred as the conductor of the car.

Motorman's Testimony

Arthur Shelby, motorman, was also examined. He testified that when the car was half way down the hill the chain brake broke, and witness gave the conductor three bells. As soon as he did so the rear brake was applied.

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"Did you have single or double brake?"

"Single brake."

Witness said he thought there were about seventy-five passengers on the car last night. He thought the car had a seating capacity of about forty.

Witness had not concluded his testimony when the Star's report closed.

Roberts. Entered into rest, Wednesday, July 13, 1898 at 4 o'clock p.m., Thomas W. Roberts, the beloved husband of Sarah R. Roberts in the 60th year of his age. Funeral from his late residence, 114 Pierce street, Anacostia, Friday, July 15 at 3 o'clock p.m. Relatives and friends respectfully invited to attend (Virginia papers please copy).

The Evening Star, July 16, 1898

Death of Thomas W. Roberts

Victim of Capital Railway Accident--Others Injured

Thomas W. Roberts, whose serious condition resulting from Sunday night's accident on the Capital Railway Company's tracks in Hillside was mentioned in Wednesday's Star, died at Providence Hospital about 4 o'clock the same afternoon. Frederick Winkleman of 419 G street southeast, a machinist at the navy yard, was also seriously injured, and it is believed he cannot recover. While most of the other victims of the accident are doing well it was reported this morning that two of them in addition to those mentioned were still suffering severely.

Coroner Carr was notified of Mr. Roberts' death late yesterday afternoon. In view of the fact that an inquest had been held in the case of Franklin C. Hismer, the first to die, he concluded that another inquest would be unnecessary. A certificate of accidental death was given, and Undertaker Nalley removed the body to the late home of the deceased, No. 124 Pierce street, Anacostia. His funeral will take place tomorrow afternoon.

Mr. Roberts, who was nearly sixty years of age, had been in the employ of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad for more than twenty years. Many years ago he was stationed at Benning, but was transferred to Anacostia because of the importance of the latter station.

As heretofore published in The Star, Mr. Roberts was standing on the front platform of the car at the time of the accident. His friend, Mr. Jackson, jumped and was not injured. Just after the accident happened Mr. Roberts was conscious and recognized a little girl who was on the car and who spoke to him after she had been rescued from the wreck.

The deceased leaves a widow and four married daughters, Mrs. N.L. Allen, Mrs. Everett Davis, Mrs. Charles Miller and Mrs. Glenwood Allen.

Mr. U.S. King of the injured passengers has been discharged from the Eastern Dispensary, while Mr. Barker is still there. His injuries are serious, but the doctors think he will recover.

Guy Latimer, who was also seriously hurt, is still in the Emergency Hospital, but is believed to be on the way to recovery. Mr. R.H. Bowman was able to go home from the hospital yesterday.

The Evening Star, July 17, 1898

Anacostia Happenings

Funeral of Thomas W. Roberts, Victim of Capital Railway Accident

The funeral of Thomas W. Roberts, who died at Providence Hospital Wednesday evening from injuries received in the street railway accident near Anacostia Sunday night, was held yesterday afternoon at 3 o'clock from his late residence, 114 Pierce street. The services were conducted by Rev. George Bowman, formerly of the Anacostia Baptist Church, assisted by Rev. E.W. Bliss, the present pastor of the same church. The pallbearers were Messrs. John Miller, --- Shoemack, James W. Bartley, George F. Pyles, James Hailey and J.W. Tolson. The interment was in Congressional cemetery.

The deceased, who was widely known throughout this section, was 59 years of age. He was a native of Virginia, having been born in Spotsylvania county. He served throughout the late war as a private in the southern army, was in many engagements, including both battles of Bull Run, and received but one slight wound. He was much esteemed by the officials in authority over him, as he was by the people of Anacostia, where he had resided during the past 25 years. He leaves a wife and four daughters, the latter being Mrs. Edward Davis of Washington, Mrs. Charles Miller of the same place and Mrs. Glenwood Allen and Mrs. Lemuel Allen, both of Anacostia.