Quincy’s Two Great Railroad Disasters

by Ruth H. Wainwright

The railroads are an important part of Quincy’s history. They helped make the city what it is today. Also, Quincy is famous for the Granite Railway, built in 1826, the first commercial railway in this country. On July 25, 1832, a man was killed in an accident on the Granite Railway incline. This might be considered to be the country’s first railroad fatality. However, it was two later disastrous train wrecks that attracted widespread attention.

The first of these took place on October 8, 1878 about one-quarter mile north of Wollaston Station. It is of special interest because of the events that preceded it. The second occurred on August 19, 1890 just north of the Dimmock Street crossing and directly behind our Adams Academy property.

October 8, 1878 - The Wollaston Train Wreck

The year 1878 was a period of intense interest in rowing as a spectator sport. Professional oarsmen competed for high stakes. An estimated 30,000 watched one competition on the Charles River. Great rivalries developed, none being more intense than that between Boston and Portland, Maine. In 1878 Boston had had the best of the competition. However, Michael J. Davis, a Portland druggist and his city’s single scull champion, had never been defeated. Davis issued a challenge to meet a Boston representative in a four-mile race for $1,000 a side.

Boston’s natural choice to meet the challenger was its star oarsman, Patrick Francis Reagan. Patsy Reagan, who worked as a teamster for the BostonCan Company and had a wife and two children, did not have this kind of money to wager, so his friends and fans raised the $1,000 and the challenge was accepted. Reagan would bet everything he had or could borrow. His friends and fans also bet heavily.

It was originally planned that the race would be on a weekend in the Charles River where a crowd of 50,000 spectators was anticipated. Representatives of the Old Colony Railroad persuaded those in charge that the tides would be wrong in the Charles River (this was before the Charles River Basin was constructed), and that the race should be held on a Tuesday at Silver Lake, a recreation Continued on page 2

Our Adams Academy Building
A National Historic Landmark

The description of the architecture of the building is from the paper by Monique B. Lehner presented before the Quincy Historical Society on October 27, 1994 in connection with the dedication as a National Historic Landmark, and the nomination form of which Mrs. Lehner was a principal researcher and author.

The recognition of the Academy Building for its architectural significance is a great compliment to Quincy. The city has long been known for the historical importance of buildings and sites here. Now, with the Adams Academy Building joining the Thomas Crane Public Library and the United First Parish Church as National Historic Landmarks, the importance of Quincy’s architectural features is given national recognition. With three buildings now recognized, Quincy has a special offering for students and others interested in architecture. Also it should give to local people, including our members, a greater appreciation of a part of their cultural heritage with which they have lived but largely taken for granted.

In his deed establishing the Adams Temple and School Fund, John Adams wrote the basic specifications for the building. It was to be a stone schoolhouse, he selected the location, it was to be of Quincy granite, and it was to be built when sufficient money had accrued in the Fund. Further, the Supervisors of the Adams Temple and School Fund accepted the responsibility of seeing that the school that the building would house fully carried out John Adams’ wishes. In the years that followed, the supervisors considered building three times but each time found the available funds inadequate.

In 1868 a fourth attempt was made to build the schoolhouse. This time it succeeded although changes in: Continued on page 4
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area in which the railroad had an interest. This was not a popular decision since the racing conditions were not as good, and the spectators were essentially limited to those who could go down by excursion train.

Silver Lake is about three miles long, located in the townships of Plympton, Halifax and Pembroke, near Kingston. It is now a water supply for the City of Brockton. Nothing remains to remind the 2,500 students at Silver Lake Regional High School of Silver Lake’s days as a recreation center, and of October 8, 1878 when 1,600 spectators lined its shores to watch the Davis vs. Reagan race. Gone are all the recreation facilities and even its railroad station. However, the Old Colony Railroad tracks still remain, the roadbed almost hidden by tall grass.

The story of the great day is well told in papers by Sylvester Gookin whose father, also Sylvester, was a top oarsman and a close friend of Patsy Reagan. Father Sylvester and his uncle, Richard and James Gookin, all were at the race to root for Patsy Reagan. From their recollections came the detailed story.

The special excursion train with more than one thousand passengers aboard left Boston at 1:30 p.m. There were twenty-two cars drawn by two of the Old Colony’s finest locomotives, the Easton and the Bristol. At Silver Lake, spectators and pool-sellers were in abundance among the 1,600 spectators. The race was scheduled to start at 3 p.m. There was a delay, however. It was not until 4 p.m. that the two oarsmen were ready to start rowing to the two-mile mark in Silver Lake, and return. Reagan started well but it was obvious at the two-mile turn that he was in trouble. Although rowing well by spells, sometimes gaining and sometimes falling back, Reagan lost by nine lengths. Davis’ time was 28 minutes, 6 and 1/4 seconds, a record for the course.

There was a tumult as the Portland partisans exulted in the crushing victory of Davis over Boston’s hero Reagan. There were near riots; arguments about money. Some of the crowd rushed down to the beach and boathouse to hail Davis, the champion, and others appealed to Reagan to protest the results. Reagan was incoherent about defeat. His only comment was “the boat pulls like a pig.” It was later believed that one of his outriggers was bent. Realizing his distraught condition, his friends rushed him to a compartment on the train, and his boat was loaded into the baggage car ahead. He was ruined financially and his friends had lost heavily.

The excursion train had been scheduled to leave for Boston at 4:20 p.m. By the time it was 5:30 p.m., the sun was setting. Gaslights went on. However, it was 6:18 p.m. before the locomotives started and the long train left the Silver Lake Station. Davis and his large party had already left to celebrate with champagne in Plympton.

Meanwhile at Norfolk Downs in Wollaston, a train crew was assembling a 30-car freight train for a run to Newport. The crew usually included four men, but was comprised of only three as the fourth was home sick and the others were covering for him so that he would not lose his day’s pay. They knew an excursion train was scheduled to leave Silver Lake at 4:20 p.m., but they figured it would probably be late. They had split the freight train to insert a car from Wollaston Iron Works into the middle of it. They had opened one of the three switches to the oncoming excursion train’s track. However, the automatic danger signal did not work. When the men saw the excursion train approaching, one of the men tried to reset the switch, but he was too late.

Engineer Westgate on the locomotive Easton knew he had the right of way, and there was no signal against him. Then suddenly he saw the freight cars and a locomotive headlight ahead. He blew one short blast for down-brakes, started the sand and jammed the valve gear into reverse. Wheels screeched. He again pulled the whistle cord and kept it down. Then the Easton reached the open switch and the freight cars derailed and rolled over. The Bristol leaped up into the air and came down on top of the Easton with a thunderous crash -- all thirty-two tons of it. The next five cars jumped the track and tumbled over the locomotives. The train stopped.

The engineer of the freight train, aghast, uncoupled his locomotive from the freight train and roared off, whistle screeching, to Quincy Station to get help. This left part of the train with no brakes set on a slight incline, and the cars rolled slowly down into the wreckage. Seats came out of the floor, and the overhead oil lamps shook out of the ceiling, spilling oil and flames. Fortunately, there was no fire.

The crews of the Bristol and Easton, although slightly injured, climbed out of their cabs and began to stoke their fires and blow off steam from the capsized locomotives. The uninjured passengers came forward to help those in the wrecked cars -- and there were a few who helped themselves to jewelry, watches and money on the dead and dying. Doctors aboard treated the injured; others rushed from Quincy by carriage; nurses came from Quincy and from Boston. The three Gookin brothers were uninjured.

Nineteen people lost their lives in this disaster. Among the dead was Patsy Reagan, age 28 years. At his
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funeral over six thousand took time from work to pay their respects to a great oarsman and a true champion. Among the many floral tributes was a five-foot single scull in flowers from Michael Davis and another oarsman.

August 19, 1890 - The Dimmock Street Train Wreck.

This disaster occurred literally in the backyard of the Adams Academy. At that time the Old Colony Railroad tracks were on grade, not depressed as today.

Involved in the wreck was a passenger train from Woods Hole to Boston carrying mostly vacationers from Cape Cod. Almost all were from out of state. It carried about three hundred and ninety-one passengers, some one hundred of whom had boarded at Brockton, the last stop of the “limited” before Boston. The train left Brockton at 12:45 p.m. about ten minutes late. It made up some time by travelling at speeds up to 65 miles per hour between that point and Quincy Station. It passed through Quincy Station without stopping at 1:00 p.m. at but slightly reduced speed.

Meanwhile a work crew was engaged in leveling the tracks through Quincy Center. They were using a heavy jack to raise the rails and cross ties so that the workmen could shovel crushed gravel underneath them. It took at least two men to move the jack. Suddenly, Charles H. Babcock, the engineer of the express train, saw the jack on his track and a workman, Michael Hartney, trying to move it. With little time to slow down, the train hit the jack at a speed of forty miles per hour or more.

The oncoming locomotive ground into the jack and the front of the locomotive rose into the air, then bounced down onto the cross ties. The first three cars of the train left the rails, but rolled past the right side of the overturned locomotive. A baggage car, a Pullman car and a drawing room car came to rest just beyond the locomotive, partly overturned. Steam from the locomotive emerged in dense clouds, filling the train, filling every crevice and suffocating those whom it did not burn to death.

Some were killed instantly by being struck or crushed, while others could not escape steam from the locomotive and were scalped to death. These were riding in the “Death Car No. 263.” According to physicians, it was more agonizing than death by fire. Some who might have escaped with minor injuries were scalped to death by inhaling the steam escaping from the wrecked engine. The engine lay a mass of jammed-up iron in the ditch.

The injured were removed to Quincy City Hospital, which had just been established. Here everything possible was done to alleviate their sufferings. Local doctors were quickly on the scene so that Boston physicians who arrived later by special train were not needed. Twelve people were killed instantly; twelve more died within a few days.

G. H. Garfield, who boarded the train at Brockton, luckily escaped injury. He described the “scene was a frightful one ... the fact that a number of human beings were dying or suffering intense agony was a terrible shock to me, especially as so little could be done at the time of the accident to help them.” Police roped off the area shortly after the collision, but had difficulty keeping souvenir hunters away.

When all survivors were rescued and the bodies of victims removed, Old Colony wrecking crews re-railed the locomotive and three coaches. These were removed to a siding in Atlantic, and a temporary track was built about the wreck. Regular trains were running by the next morning.

An official investigation of the crash followed. The actual loss to Old Colony Railroad through damage and rolling stock was placed at about $20,000. The amount paid in damages could not be estimated.

Joseph F. Welch, a supervisor, was arrested on August 30, and two days later arraigned in Quincy District Court on a manslaughter charge stemming from the accident. He pleaded not guilty and was released on $2,000 bail. On September 5, Quincy Court Judge James Humphrey released his report of the tragedy, charging Welch with being criminally negligent. He singled out Welch for failing to notify the men of the train’s expected approach. Welch was indicted by the Norfolk County Grand Jury on the manslaughter charge. His trial started on April 28, 1891 and ended May 1 with a hung jury.

References:


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Silver Lake and '78" by Sylvester Gookin.

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the design had to be made to suit the finances available. Charles Francis Adams, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, headed the project, His son John Quincy Adams and Josiah Phillips Quincy, members of the board, were designated to develop plans for the academic building. Selected as architects was the firm of Ware and Van Brunt, then a leader in the architectural profession in Boston while Boston led the nation. They designed many academic buildings, the best known of which is Harvard’s Memorial Hall. The design work was done in 1869 and the construction the following year. The contract was completed on January 1, 1871 at a cost of $28,867.99 including architects’ fee, heating and gas. The building stands today essentially unchanged since the date of its completion. The only changes which have been made to the exterior are the removal in 1951 of a tall attenuated central wooden tower and the replacement of a polychrome slate roof with a monochrome slate roof. Thus the architectural integrity of the building has been preserved.

The Adams Academy Building is a High Victorian Gothic Revival building of rough faced granite ashlar with brick trim. It was the first fully developed building in America the design of which was based on the rational theories of Viollet-le-Duc. It was followed by others. When Henry Van Brunt designed the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge in 1879, it was described as being in the “Adams Academy Style”.

The background of this architectural style is interesting because Quincy has examples of earlier styles. The early 1800s saw the continuation of the Colonial style and the emergence of the delicate manifestation of the classical style, the Federal mode as in the Miller Stile Inn. This was followed by what was considered the first true American style, the Greek Revival. One of the important icons in granite of this stark classic style is the United First Parish Church designed by Alexander Parris in 1827. Following these three classically-oriented styles, Colonial, Federal and Greek Revival, was a period characterized by a spate of European-influenced styles – a period of eclectic and romantic revivals which enlivened our streetscapes with picturesque structures. First appeared the Italianate Style rich in bracketed eaves and door hoods. Concomitant with it the Greek Revival characterized by steep roofs delineated by shaped bargeboards. Soon after, these styles were followed by the French-inspired Mansardic mode. Therefore, when the Board of Supervisors of the Adams Temple and School Fund decided to plan for their schoolhouse, they had indeed a choice of architectural styles. Their selection of a form of the High Victorian Gothic Revival Style has proved a wise one.

Granite and brick construction was in favor at this time but budgetary limits may have influenced the use of bricks in the voussoirs, in the infill of the large pointed arch in the gables, in the stepped patterning between the eaves and granite wall and in the recessed entrance, instead of costly stone carvings, in order to lower the cost and at the same time achieve an up-to-date medieval style.

This design solution, in which stone was used with brick trim, instead of the more usual brick with stone trim, as at Memorial Hall in Cambridge, the traditional way of expressing Victorian polychromy, achieved in Quincy a new shift in style of which Adams Academy was the first example. This new rational wall articulation distinguishes the best of Ware and Van Brunt’s work that followed in the 1870s. The style of the Adams Academy represents an innovative alternative, combining English polychromy and medievalism with the structural expression of Viollet-le-Duc, French scholar, archeologist, architect and theorist. Henry Van Brunt was familiar with the works of Viollet-le-Duc for he had begun translating him as early as 1863 and soon recognized that the Frenchman was writing about imposing logic and order in architectural design and of expressing structure in the design itself.

This influence is readily visible in the composition of the triple-gable wall which clearly articulates the structural analysis of the building. The Adams Academy Building was the first in the United States to exhibit this rational design system. Later, in 1872 when the translation of Viollet-le-Duc appeared, there were others, but the Academy was the first.

One can easily “read” the building and understand its function without entering the structure. The right gable with the bay window was originally for library use, while the left gable lit the classroom. The segmental modified arch of the recessed entrance is repeated not only in the triple window of the left front gable but also in the windows of the side elevation.

Although the Adams Academy Building did not establish an immediate “style” because the vogue for Richardson intervened, it anticipates the structural expression of Louis Sullivan. It is important for its innovation by which its architects Ware and Van Brunt created in 1869, specifically for Quincy, a unique system of rational design in a contemporary academic building.

The interior also is architecturally significant.

It is hoped that a better understanding of the Adams Academy Building’s architectural significance will add some cultural enrichment for those who view it.