

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT
Lesson Title –5 Ws of the Great East Thompson Train Wreck
From Judy Perkins

Grade - 5

Length of class period – two 40 minute periods

Inquiry – What information regarding a historical event can be learned from the examination of a variety of primary and secondary sources?

Objectives –

Students will:

- Examine primary and secondary sources
- Organize information
- Evaluate sources

Materials

- 3 images of train wreck
- Railroad map
- Alice Ramsdell’s retelling of the event
- New York Times story, Dec. 5, 1891
- “The Great East Thompson Train Wreck” by Chuck Straub
- 5 Ws graphic organizer
- Source evaluation sheet

Activities

- With students working in small groups, pass out copies of the 3 train wreck images
- After studying the images students should complete as much as they can of the 5 Ws organizer and the Source Evaluation sheet
- Then pass out the railroad map and have students repeat the step above
- Continue to pass out one source at a time, allowing enough time for each source to be examined, information recorded in 5 Ws organizer, and source evaluated
- Have groups share their 5 Ws and Source Evaluation sheets with the whole group

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

Teacher will listen to group discussions, whole group sharing, evaluate completed graphic organizers.

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards –

2.2(4) Compare and contrast information provided by primary and secondary sources.

2.3(6) Create written work using primary sources.

Image #1



Image #2



Image #3



Alice Ramsdell's Retelling

(taken from *Thompson Bicentennial Memory Book*, 1985, pg.35)

Alice Ramsdell shares a story about the train wreck with us. "Otis Clark was the station agent and he lived in East Thompson with his family. I knew his wife. I have heard Grandma Clark tell this tale many a time.

"Grandma Clark heard the smash-up, the engines coming together. And she heard folks yell. She quickly put on a clean apron and shawl and she run down because she was so afraid her husband had done something wrong.

"This all happened right across the road from the Methodist parsonage, and they took the wounded into the parsonage when they didn't have any more room in the train station. And it was said that Reverend Jackson carried them on his back into his home, and his wife and the neighbors looked after them.

“It was a long time before Grandma Clark could find Otis. ‘Otis, did you make a mistake?’ ‘No, Ma, it was made ‘fore it ever came in here. It was going east on a westbound track, and ya know that’s against the rules.’ So she took off her apron and tore it in strips and bound up the wounds on passengers. And that was the way of that.”

The New York Times, New York, NY, 5 Dec 1891

PROVIDENCE, R. I., Dec. 4.---The worst wreck ever experienced by the New-York and New-England Railroad occurred at East Thompson, Conn, at 6:30 o'clock this morning. Four trains collided with each other, killing three men and injuring four others.

The trains in collision were the Long Island and Eastern States Line limited express from Brooklyn to Boston; the boat train from Norwich, bound for Boston; the regular freight going east from Putnam to Boston, and the Southbridge freight from East Thompson, bound west. The scene of the accident is about ten miles from the Rhode Island line, and the nearest station of importance in Woonsocket, sixteen miles away.

The two freight trains were on the north track and the two passenger trains on the south track when the accident occurred. There were in reality two collisions, the first occurring on a spur track to the north of the two main lines which run through East Putnam.

At the hour named on the spur track, having the right of way on the west-bound track, it was a foggy morning, and without warning the east-bound freight from Putnam suddenly rushed down upon the Southbridge freight. Both engines were demolished and the freight cars on the spur track were forced back with terrific force.

A flat car and two long freight cars were pushed over the bank running along the track. Cars were also thrown over on the main line, and before any one could think, down dashed the Long Island and Eastern States Line Limited Express from Brooklyn. A second later the engine of this train had turned completely around, and lay on the bank below the tracks, a wreck. Near by lay the headless body of the engineer, Harry W. Taber, and the mangled remains of the fireman, Gerald Fitzgerald.

The express consisted of two passenger cars, Nos. 171 and 172, and the two Pullman vestibule sleeping cars Cato and Midland. There were twelve passengers, nine of them in the sleepers. One passenger was killed. He was in the Pullman car Midland.

The fourth train struck this particular car. This was the boat train from Norwich, bound east. There had not been sufficient time for any person to go up the track to warn this train before it turned the curve leading into East Thompson. The curve hid the scene from the engineer of the boat train. The result was that it crashed into the rear end of the Long Island train.

Immediately the cars took fire, and the Midland burned. A young man in the rear end of it lost his life. The only remains found were a watch and a few charred bones.

The conductors on this train, on which all the loss of life occurred, escaped uninjured. They were George H. Cross of Boston and Frank E. Jennison of 212 East Thirtieth Street, New York. Michael J. Flynn was the regular fireman on the limited, but he was taking a day off and was on the train bound for Boston. He was uninjured, but his substitute was killed. Two years ago a similar accident occurred, and Flynn's substitute was killed in a wreck.

Of the passengers in the "Midland," W. T. Colburn of 120 West Forty-seventh Street, New York, was bruised, and Frank Barber and John Chandler of Boston had flesh cuts in the leg. Their car, it is stated, was lighted by kerosene.

The second Pullman, "Cato," was a solid vestibuled car lighted by gas, which the conductor turned out as he escaped.

The other passengers on the train were: Mrs. G. Christine, 584 Washington Avenue, Brooklyn; B. L. Kilgour, Boston; J. G. Piodela, Hempstead, L. I.; J. N. Flanders, Boston; George W. Dalton, Brooklyn. They were not injured.

Of the cars of the limited train nearest the engine one was but little damaged. The others had the windows and frames torn out on one side for half its length. The tender of the Long Island engine was knocked to pieces.

The boat train was in charge of Conductor C. H. Ingalls of Dorchester, who had only his thumb hurt. Edward Hurley of South Boston, engineer, and William M. Londe of Dedham, fireman, were thrown down the embankment and rendered insensible for a time. They were not seriously hurt, but their engine caught fire from the blazing Pullman car. The express car was burned. The smoker and a regular coach were pulled out of danger. There were over thirty persons on the train and they were thrown violently forward by the shock of the collision, many of them sustaining severe bruises.

No one was reported as seriously injured on the two freight trains.

It was late to-night before the work of clearing this part of the wreck was half done. The station is in an out-of-the-way place, the telegraphic facilities amount to almost nothing, and information of the affair was not received until the morning was well advanced.

One of the station officials gave as the cause of the accident the statement that East Thompson was not notified that the freight was coming down from Putnam. The Southbridge freight he considers was in its proper place. The reason that the two trains which follow each other going to Boston were wrecked was because there was no one in a position to warn them in time. The fog and the curve in the road prevented the engineers of the fated trains from seeing the obstruction until it was too late.

The Fire Department from Webster, Mass., was summoned to extinguish the fire, but the "Midland" was completely destroyed. The bodies of Fitzgerald and Taber were removed to Webster, and after being prepared for burial were forwarded to Boston, where the men reside. The damage to the railroad company will exceed \$300,000. Superintendent Lovering of the Adams Express says that his company is a sufferer by the smash-up, but to what extent he is unable to state.

Superintendent Grant of the New-York and New-England Railroad attributed the accident to the dense fog, which he said obscured the vision of the engineers and prevented them from seeing each other's trains. At midnight the main tracks were cleared and the work was still in progress at the spur track.

The Great East Thompson Train Wreck

Chuck Straub

During the early, foggy morning hours of December 4th 1891 four trains would meet in East Thompson, Connecticut with disastrous consequences. No one could have known earlier that morning that they were all destined to go down in history in what would later be known as The Great East Thompson Train Wreck. This spectacular crash of four trains, is the only train wreck of its' kind in the history of railroading in the United States.

It all happened in what is now known as the "quiet corner" of eastern Connecticut. In 1891, Putnam Connecticut was a busy and not so quiet railroad center, a key station for the New York & New England Railroad. The station and city thrived. As dawn came to Putnam on that fateful day, The Long Island and Eastern States Express had arrived from Hartford. They had been experiencing mechanical problems with the engine and made a request that they get a different engine at Putnam. Waiting and ready for them at Putnam was the New York and New England engine #105. This engine was the pride of engineer Harry Tabor. Harry Tabor was a well known, experienced engineer, well liked by the station crews along the line. Tabor was unmarried and was from a railroading family. He was planning to give up that run in the next two weeks saying that he didn't like to "speed at such a fearful rate". The men coming from Hartford got off in Putnam and Harry Tabor along with Gerry Fitzgerald, as his fireman, went with engine 105 for the engine swap. The man that was supposed to be with Tabor was Mike Flynn, but he had earlier marked himself off the roster saying that he had a premonition of disaster. The Long Island and Eastern States Express was stopped right next to the Express Freight #212. Freight #212 was made up of 11 cars carrying various freight. Harry Wildes was the engineer and Jacob Boyce was his fireman. The engine crews of the Long Island and Eastern States Express and the Express Freight #212 even exchanged small talk as the Express Freight #212 waited to be cleared to move out. At the same time, The Norwich Steamboat Express was quickly approaching Putnam. It was running about an hour late because the steamboat had been late from New York City. Ed Hurley was the engineer and Will Loudon was his fireman. The Norwich Steamboat Express was carrying about 75 passengers.

At Putnam, the dispatcher had 3 trains to worry about that were all headed to Boston. Speed was always an important factor for trains. They wanted to provide fast service. The dispatcher in Putnam devised a plan to get all 3 trains quickly out of Putnam on their way. There were 2 tracks that went out of Putnam towards East Thompson and on to Boston. Track #1 was a westbound track and track #2 was a eastbound track. The dispatchers' idea was a bit unusual but he saw no problem with it. The Long

Island and Eastern States Express would take the eastbound track #2 whenever it was ready once the engines had been swapped. It would stay on this track all the way to Boston. The Express Freight #212 would be allowed to leave ahead of the passenger train but sent east on the westbound track #1 all the way to East Douglas Massachusetts. Once at East Douglas, the freight train would be switched back to track #2 and stay on that all the way to Boston. By doing this, The Express Freight Train #212 could leave first but not get in the way of the Long Island and Eastern States Express which was expected to pass the freight somewhere just past East Thompson. When the Norwich Steamboat Express arrived in Putnam, it only had to make a normal station stop in Putnam and would be immediately cleared to speed off to Boston. The dispatcher thought he had a good plan and it might have been, except he had forgotten about the Southbridge Freight Local which was sitting on the tracks in East Thompson.

East Thompson's train station was neat and well equipped. The station had a depot, turntable, signal cabin, freight house and had western union facilities. To the west of the station, a double set of tracks ran towards Putnam. There was a large bend with hills on both sides of the track. A branch track went off to the northwest to Southbridge. The station faced south towards the double set of tracks. Just east of the station the tracks ran along a raised embankment and then on a small bridge over a dirt road. On the raised embankment near the station, the words "East Thompson" were displayed in whitewashed stone.



In East Thompson, engineer Joe Page maneuvered The Southbridge Freight Local with Engine #31 with an 8 car train out onto the main line of track #1. The railroad timetable instructions gave him every right to do this. His train would soon have pulled back into the yard to go onto the Southbridge branch rails. It was around 6:30 am in quiet little East Thompson that Engineer Joe Page and his crew heard the shrill cry of a train whistle off in the distance. Since no one had seen the Long Island and Eastern States Express go through yet, they figured it must be her running late. Then the whistle blew again and the awful truth became apparent as the yellowish glow of the headlight rounded the curve. A train was coming right at them on the same track that they were on. Joe Page yelled to his fireman "head for the woods" and they both jumped from the train. The Express Freight #212 smashed into The Southbridge Freight Local with terrific force. Steam went shooting into the air. Wood and steel broke, splintered and flew with great force. Most of the cars on the Southbridge Freight local jackknifed and fires started.



Unaware of the disaster that now lay across both of the tracks in East Thompson, the Long Island and Eastern States Express, as the Putnam dispatcher had planned, was

only a few minutes behind but on track #2. The Long Island and Eastern States Express living up to her reputation barreled around the curve at East Thompson at about 50 miles per hour and ran right into the debris and carnage of the previous wreck that now covered both tracks. The engine derailed, did a 180 degree turn, then buried itself into the dirt. A red hot poker was shoved through fireman Gerry Fitzgerald killing him. Engineer Harry Tabor was decapitated. Red hot steam shot out of the engine. The quick thinking of the conductor, Frank Jennison probably saved many lives. As he left the mangled train, he turned off the valves to the gas lighting, preventing a disastrous fire. The people sleeping in the Pullman sleeper cars didn't have any idea what had happened. Shocked and dazed they stumbled out of the smashed cars to safety. When Engineer Tabor was found, his pocket watch was forever stopped at 6:47 am.



Amid the confusion, someone remembered that The Norwich Steamboat Express was about due. A flagman was sent running down the track to warn them, but too late. The Norwich Steamboat Express came roaring around the curve and ran straight into the back end of the Long Island and Eastern States Express setting a sleeper car and their own engine on fire. Ed Hurley, the engineer and Wil Loudon, the fireman, both miraculously survived the crash with very bad cuts scrapes and bruises. Within a matter of minutes, two trains collided head on, a third train smashed into the debris of that wreck and then a fourth train slammed into all of that debris. The amazing thing about all this wreckage is that only 2 train men were killed and 1 passenger was never found but believed killed in the burnt out wreckage. About 500 feet of burnt out, twisted wreckage and debris covered the tracks.

Stunned and bewildered the residents of East Thompson awoke to an unforgettable sight. The East Thompson station agent, Otis Clark, used the telegraph to call for help. In Webster Massachusetts a passenger trains' run was quickly cancelled and local firemen loaded a pumper and hose cart onto an empty flatbed car which was promptly sent to East Thompson. By midmorning 3 wreck trains arrived from Hartford, Willimantic and Norwood Mass. Fires were put out and the wreckage removed.



Today, the railroad tracks are gone but the old railroad bed still remains. There is nothing left to remind anyone of the great collision. No signs or plaques to remind visitors of the terrible events of 1891. The old station has been torn down but remnants of it can still be found. Nature has overtaken the station, fields and the sides of the old tracks. The bridge over the road is gone and the embankment to the road made more gradual. The view is no longer as it was in 1891



but the basic lay of the land is still the same as it was on that fateful morning. The rail bed, hills, and the station site are still there. They remain silent witness to the history and tragedy of that eventful day, long ago in what is now known as Connecticut's quiet corner.

The location of the train wreck site and station

From the intersection of route 200 and 193 in Thompson Connecticut, head northeast on route 193. You will travel 1.6 miles down route 193 and come to a Y in the road. Leave route 193 here and bear right onto East Thompson Road. You will pass the raceway golf course, quickly followed by the Thompson Speedway, then a cemetery. After traveling 3.1 miles from route 193, be sure you bear right at the next Y, staying on East Thompson road. From this Y continue another .7 mile to your destination. The parking area is just around a sharp curve in the road. Park on the left side of the road in a sandy parking spot. To know if this is the correct spot, look across the street: you will see a yellow gate on a little hill. You are already on the site of the only 4 train wreck in the history of the United States This is the site of the great East Thompson rain wreck. Follow the old rail bed west and you will come to the location of the old station.

Acknowledgments:

Connecticut Railroads An Illustrated History
Greg Turner and Melancthon Jacobus
The Connecticut Historical Society 1989
The Great East Thompson Train Crash
Diane deManbey Duebber

5 Ws Graphic Organizer

What happened?	
When did it happen?	
Where did it happen?	
Why did it happen?	
Who was involved?	
Why is this event unique in history?	

Source Evaluation Sheet

For each source used, indicate if it is a primary or secondary source. Explain how you know if it is primary or secondary. Then rate the source on a scale from 1-5 according to how much information you were able to get from the source. (5 is highest, 1 is lowest)

Source	Primary	Secondary	How do you know?	Rate it 1-5
Image #1				
Image #2				
Image #3				
Map				
Alice Ramsdell				
New York Times				
Chuck Straub				

