



Gruesome Train Accident Death

By 1861, there were 9,500 miles of train track in the South and 22,000 miles of track in the North. By fall of 1863, the Southern railroads were in bad shape. Before the war, Southern railroads had imported iron from England. The Union blockade of ports effectively shut off that supply and parts were not readily available to replace worn out equipment. Railroads were owned by civilians and the Confederacy's manufacturing efforts focused on ammunition and equipment for the military.

Railroad accidents were common and, because telegraph communication was sporadic, railroad crews were often unaware of broken rails and collapsed bridges, causing even more accidents.

There was also damage by Union troops, who were sabotaging the rails to the best of their ability. "Sherman's Neckties" are legendary – the heating of rails by pulling them up, heating them until they would bend, and wrapping them around tree trunks.¹

The letter shown in Figure 1 was sent by Dr. Baldwin Mathews Buckner (1813-86) from his plantation "Plain View" in Louisa County, Va., after securing the remains of a young train accident victim and burying him on his own property.

More Than I'd Want to Know!

Dr. Buckner wrote an incredibly graphic letter (Figure 1) to Solomon Carpenter (1802- after 1880) of Chatham County, N.C.

The postal side of the Buckner folded letter is shown in Figure 2. It is franked with a pair of 5¢ blue local prints (CSA 7) used with a manuscript cancel of "Bumpass, Va / Novr 11 [1863]." It is addressed to Mr. Solomon Carpenter, Martha's Vineyard, Chatham County, N.C.

Carpenter's 27-year-old son, Robert Carpenter (1836-63) was killed instantly in a railroad accident in Louisa County, Va., on Aug. 25, 1863. Robert was a private in Company E, Third North Carolina infantry, Army of Northern Virginia.

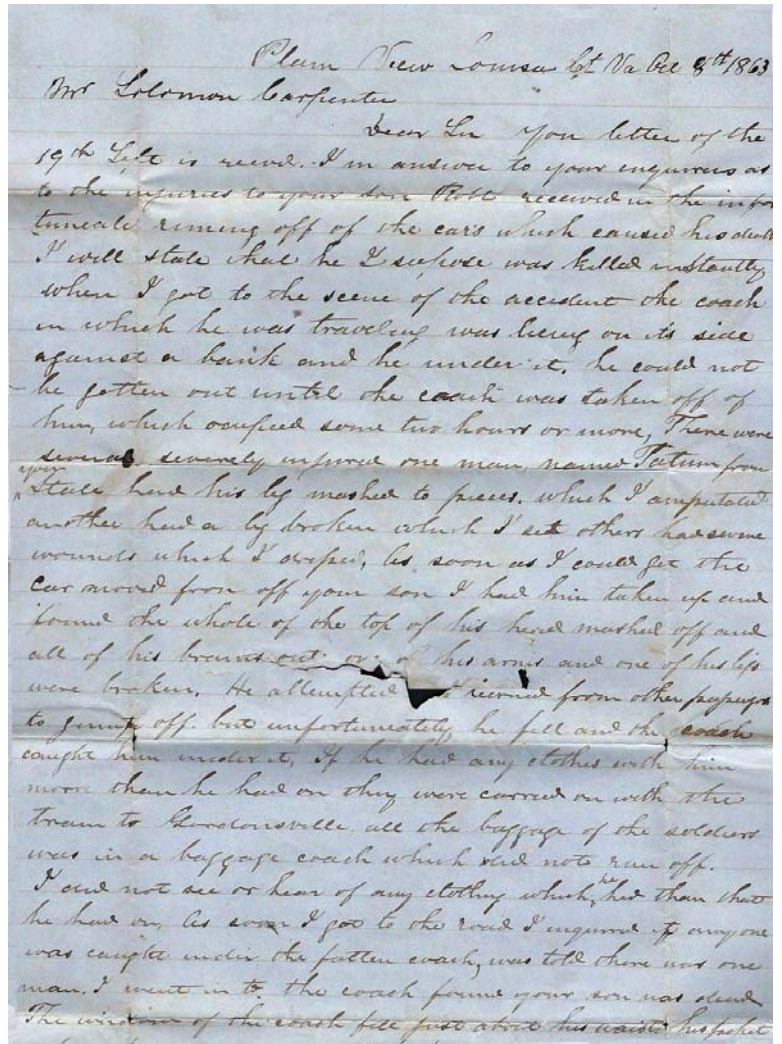


Figure 1. First page of folded letter from "first responder" Dr. Buckner to a soldier's father, describing his death in requested gruesome detail.

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The letter, responding to the victim's father's inquiry as to the exact nature of his son's injuries, is transcribed as follows:

Plain View, Louisa County, Virginia

October 8th 1863

Mr. Solomon Carpenter

Dear Sir,

Your letter of the 19 Sept. is received. In answer to your inquires as to the injuries your son Robert received in the unfortunate running off of the cars which caused his death, I will state that he, I suppose, was killed instantly. When I got to the scene of the accident, the coach in which he was traveling was lying on its side against a bank and he under it.

He could not be gotten out until the coach was taken off of him which occupied two hours or more. There were several



Figure 2. Postal side of the Figure 1 folded letter.

severely injured. One man named Tatum from your State had his leg mashed to pieces, which I amputated. Another had a leg broken which I set. Others had severe wounds which I dressed. As soon as I could get the car moved from off your son, I had him taken up and found the whole of the top of his head mashed off and all of his brains out. One of his arms and one of his legs were broken. He attempted, I learned from other passengers, to jump off but unfortunately he fell and the coach caught him under it.

If he had any clothes with him more than he had on they were carried on with the train to Gordonsville. All the baggage of the soldiers was in a baggage coach which did not run off. I did not see or hear of any clothing which he had than that he had on. As soon as I got to the road, I enquired if anyone was caught under the fallen coach [and] was told there was one man. I went to the coach [and] found your son was dead. The window of the coach fell just about his waist. His jacket in his pantaloons was cut open and I suppose if he had any money it was taken out. I enquired how the matter was and was told that his Sergeant had taken his money. I enquired for the Sergeant but could find none. I called the attention of some of the officers to this circumstance. Diligent inquiry was made but the man who had done the foul deed could not be found. My opinion is that some base villain robbed him as soon as the accident occurred. The papers which I found on him were in the side pocket of his jacket. They were taken out in the presence of several officers and many soldiers & citizens.

Respectfully yours with much sympathy and respect,
- B. M. Buckner

Military railroad operations in northern Virginia: men working on a railroad bridge.

Library of Congress



Solomon Carpenter had four other sons who served in Company D of the 61st North Carolina.

There is a letter to Solomon in the digital collections of East Carolina University dated Nov. 26, 1862, from his son Elbert. It records the recent deaths of his brothers Wyatt and James while at Tarboro, Edgecombe County, apparently of disease. Elbert himself was killed at Kinston, N.C., Dec. 14, 1862, less than three weeks after the letter to his father.

An article appearing in a Richmond paper dated Aug. 27, 1863, reported the accident as follows [N.B. the paper states that Robert was a member of the 55th North Carolina Regiment]:

The accident on the Central train.

A passenger by the Central train, Tuesday, furnishes us with the following facts concerning the accident which happened on the road Tuesday morning. It was more serious than at first reported:

As the train for Gordonsville arrived at a point about two miles above Bumpass, 10 o'clock, Tuesday morning, the axle of the hindmost car broke, throwing two cars off the track and upsetting one. A soldier, who had papers on his person identifying him as Robert Carpenter, of the 55th North Carolina regiment, jumped off the train, the car falling on him, crushing his head, right arm and leg in a horrible manner.

He was instantly killed. Letters found on his person from his father and mother, and postmarked Martha's Vineyard, N.C., showed that he was a convalescent from Winder Hospital, returning to his regiment. His remains were buried on the farm of Dr. B.M. Buckner, who took charge of his effects, and who promptly hastened to the relief of the wounded. The left leg of another North Carolina soldier, named Tatum, was crushed and amputated above the knee; another, a youth, named Beckham, had his left leg broken above the ankle, and adjusted; another, name unknown, received a severe flesh wound in the right thigh. The wounded were sent to Gordonsville. No case is serious except that of Tatum. Several other passengers were considerably bruised, many of the seats being thrown from their places.

The accident is believed to be attributable entirely to the defect in the axle of the car, and not to any fault in the bed of the road.²

So much grief in not just one, but many families on both sides of the conflict. ☐

Trish is always happy to hear from readers. You may write to her at trishkauf@comcast.net.

Endnotes

1. *Railroads of the Confederacy*, Civil War History, American Battlefield Trust; www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/railroads-confederacy, accessed Jan. 13, 2020.
2. Cowardin & Hammersley, *The Daily Dispatch*, Aug. 27, 1863; *Richmond Dispatch*, Richmond, Va., Aug. 27, 1863.



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