## The Wreck of the Federal



The Federal as it arrived in Washington Union Station. The hole in the ceiling (just below the skylight in the center) was the exit cout of a torn-off train wheel. The GG1 locomotive (foreground) was later completely lowered to the basement level and dismanted while construction crews working around-the-clock resurfaced the concrete main floor in three days. Copyright WASHINGTON POST; Reprinted by permission of the District of Columble public Library

By Robert Klara

I was 8:38 a.m., Jan. 15, 1953. Raymond Klopp answered the telephone at his desk in the Statiomaster's Office of Washington Union Station. The voice of train director John Feeney, atop "K" Tower 2,000 feet north of the terminal, exploded over the line: "Runaway train coming right at you on Tack 16. see the hell out of there!"

at you on Track 16, get the hell out of there!" Klopp had 10 seconds, Yelling "get out, get out!" to his bewildered coworkers must have taken up four of those seconds. Over his shoulder, the nose of a Pennsy GGI burned though the cold dawn in a cloud of sparks and brake smoke. Klopp broke for the door. His co-worker Richard Outlaw dropped his telegraph and dragged a screaming secretary with him through the door.

Pennsylvania Railroad's overnight flyer, the Federal, was coming in. The train which would make perhaps the most spectacular crash in the hadron of American railroading had been routinely of American railroading had been routinely casembled nine hours earlier. Thirteen stainless steel New Haven care glinted lamps in Betonis South Station an hour shy of midnight. The Federal—No. 17 toping folding schedules and station is proposed. In the state of t

Washington would happen in five days.

The Federal strode out of Boston under diesel power and left its second stop in Providence, Rhode Island, 10 minutes ahead of schedule—at 11:50 p.m.—but as it rolled through the marshes near Kingston, ender whistles from Ralph Ward, the conductor whistles from Ralph Ward, the conductor

Ward had felt the brakes dragging on the two rear cars, and jumped down to inspect after the train came to a stop. After a half hour of unsuccessful brake tests, Matta climbed down himself and walked back with in flashight. The first two coaches yielded coach Matta found a closed angle cock. The discovery want 100 abnormal to seasoned railroaders; gradual pressure leakage from the line behind a closed angle cock had been known to hangu pie brakes every so often. was sagin under wew—56 minutes law was again under wew—56 minutes law.

At New Haven, Matta's locomotives cut off for a return run to Boston. Ward would be staying on as far as New York, where the Pennsylvania crew would take over. When the foreman car inspector asked Ward about the delay, he mentioned the brakes on the rear two Pullmans. Matta didn't tell him about the angle cock; nor did he report it to anyone else.

use the sport it is allyone east. It windows ago with the rear from the Springfield, Mass., run were coupled to its rear and an electric motor locemotive added up front. I will be selected into the commontive added up front. With no scheduled stops between New Haven and New York City, engineer New Haven and New York City, engineer New Haven and New York City, engineer to be selected to the selection of the sele

In the oily daffeness of Pennylvania is, inethock, GGI No. 4876 was fleeing its 238 tons of electric muscle near the Hudson Birve Portal. Inside was Harry William Brower, a crack engineer of 68 who had googed I years at the controller Friennan Googed I years at the controller Friennan the service, shared in the commiserative the service, shared in the commiserative that common to trainmen at work in the wee hours. Brower would later recall nothing unusual about the few minutes during the coupling. Something of a collective gas would issue from the hearing room of the

Senator Pastore: "Were you apprised in New York when you assumed your post as engineer that there had been an experience of difficulty in Kingston, R.I.?"

Brower: "Nobody told us a thing about it, of their having trouble up there."

Senator Tobes: "Did you know about the stopping at Kingston, R.I.?"

Brower: "Nobody said a word"

A scattering of crew stood on the platform as the engine pulled into the tunnel, its headlamp ablaze, an eerie glow falling about the painted red keystone and trim gold striping.

Soon Brower was speeding south with the Federal's 400 sleeping passengers, stopping at Philadelphia and Wilmington. A gray sunrise spread outside the windows a few minutes before the stop at Baltimore. the brakes were working perfectly

They left Baltimore at 7:59, and from there it was a straight shot to Washington. The pantograph crackled under the Pennsylvania's catenary as Brower brought his locomotive up to 80 mph. where he would

leave it for the next hour and a half. Two miles outside of Union Station, the Federal was speeding downgrade around a 1359 switched to yellow as Brower acknowledged the cab whistle and moved the controller from the welfit to the fifth to not 17 pounds. He didn't notice that the brake exhaust was unusually short, 24 previous brake applications of that kind and easily dightened the reigns on the Fed-

But the train was still peaking 70, barrel ing towards "C" interlocking where the speed limit was a scrupulous 25. The Federal shot down the next 3 600 feet of track in the nervous space of a few seconds. Just before the tower. Brower shut the controller down and threw the brake valve into emergency Another short exhaust followed. The Federal slowed almost impercentibly as the engine's brakes seized up and started shrieking. Brower stared dazed out the cab window as the catenary poles whizzed past at 50 mph. As Brower velled across the cab "I can't hold the train!" Mover threw the fireman's valve into emergency, but the line pressure was gone. At that instant, both men realized the inevitable. Brower's hand reached for the horn

Atop "C" Tower, the assistant train direct roloxed up from his logs when he heard the rapid horn bleats. The Federal tripped across the first interlocking right below him at nearly double the mandated speed, throwing the cars into a nausesting saway. The train blew past with Brower frantically The train blew past with Brower frantically middle. "C Tower discovers on the cab window." C Tower discovers on the cab window. "C C Conductor Joseph Murphey had been Conductor Joseph Murphey had been Conductor Joseph Murphey had been

walking up through the third car to lock the lavatories and announce the last stop when the Federal hit "C" interlocking knocking him to one side. Murnhey's 40 years' experience as a conductor told him something was terribly wrong, and he raced for the emergency brake. As he reached the front vestibule, the Klayon horn filled his ears. He released the valve There was no exhaust. Murphey stumbled back into the coach and told the passengers to lie down on the floor. In the fourth car, baggageman Fred King grabbed hold of the seats and picked his way to the rear for his brake valve. He was an arm's reach from it when the Federal dove across an-

other switch and threw him across the car. As John Feeney's mind raced for a rerouting configuration at "K", the Federal was already on top of his only switch, knocking over to Track 16. It was 1,690 feet from the terminal as Feeney dialed the Stationmaster's Office. Stammering into

the receiver, he watched sparks flying from the engine's wheel trucks. Inside, fireman Moyer was bracing himself with his back against the control panel. Brower stood fast as Union's track shed loomed larger and larger before him. He threw the GG1's

motors into reverse and ducked.

Richard Oullaws would know for the rest
of his life that it was true what they say
about the split second before an accident,
about everything slowing down. He had run
about everything slowing down. He had run
tumed around. He even thought the engine
"heistated" a little. The 1,500 runway tons
of the Federal struck the steel bumper post
and demolshed it. Engine 4876 vaulted 20
inches up onto the platform, leaving both its
inches up onto the platform, leaving both
The Sationmaster's Office explored the train.
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As sure as there was "a Red under every bed," many believed that a communist saboteur had tampered with the Federal's brakes.

it, cutting a path through a steel support column. The mangled hulk of engine and first car slid 84 feet across the passenger concourse where the foot-thick cement floor studdered and gave way sending the engine and first coach crashing into the basement. post and slid into the concourse next to the first. Passengers inside screamed as the car's front end teetered over the chasm.

It was over in seconds.

A haunting silence ensued, broken only
by the sounds of hissing steam and buzzing
electric cables. But a miraculous fortune
had attended the crash; once Feeney's fateful telephone call had cleared the station
master's office, it was ironically the sound
of that office being demolished that
warned those on the concourse of the juggernaut's approach. Thrones of police and

emergency workers appeared within minutes, as though only the horrible caterwaul of tearing metal had somehow summoned them A trickle of dazed passengers emerged from the crumpled coaches to be attended by spectators-turned-nurses who volunteered on the spot. In all, ambulances carried off 59 injured (the most serious having suffered a fractured pelvis)-but no deceased. Harry Brower found himself limping away from the GG1 which he had heen certain would be his tomb. In the smoking compartment of the third coach, a man grabbed a wooden chair and threw it through the window to climb out. Turning to the passenger behind him, he said "I've always wanted to do that ' Questions in the wake of No. 173's

crash were further complicated by the winds of McCarthvism which were blowing hot and furious through every office in Washington. As sure as there was "a Red under every bed," many believed that a communist saboteur had tampered with the Federal's brakes. During its hearings on Ian. 21 and 22, the Senate Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce did little to discourage this sentiment, grilling every member of the Federal's crew between Boston and Washington with embarrassingly leading questions. The FBI Washington Terminal Company and Pennsylvania Railmad followed with their own investigations. In the end, however, it was only the somewhat more rail-wise panel of the Interstate Commerce Commission that would explain the disaster

The infamous angle cock behind the third coach No. 8665 had been found closed during an inspection of the wreckage. Ahrasions on the upper surface of its handle matched similar markings on the lower portion of the car's rear end sill. Further the coach's Tightlock coupler required a minimum vertical clearance of six inches, whereas the fourth car (a combination baggage, coach) had older Pitt couplers with a clearance of only % of an inch. This, together with the disparate truck spring assemblies had caused an unusually rough deflection between the cars-allowing the end sill's continual striking from Baltimore on down to close the angle cock and effectively cut off braking power to all cars behind it. Technically speaking, only the cars behind the closed cock had been runaways: the brakes-insufficient though they were-had held on the engine and first three cars Amidst the rubble, dust and scorch marks of the Federal's path, molten droplets of metal

had dripped from engine 4876's brake shoes. Only two days following the accident, as the 150 foot hole in the concourse was bethe 150 foot hole in the concourse was beper reporter caught enginemy and the state of the congreater reporter caught enginemy at the lay City Roundhouse outside of 
Washington, preparing to take the Congressional north to New York. Brower retraced both comment and picture-posing, 
taked both comment and pictureposing, 
the confidence of the confidence of the conhis engine where he stood alone for a full 
his confidence was testing his brakes. pri