Working Title: *A Bridge to Tragedy: The Haverhill Train Wreck of 1888*

*For the podcast — **Oblivion: Forgotten Tragedies***

Format: Historic Disaster & Narrative Non-Fiction (10 minutes long—or so.)



On the winter night of January 10, 1888, the Boston & Maine Railroad's express train to Portland neared the Merrimack River in Haverhill, Massachusetts. It didn't make it across. A chain reaction caused 12 people to die, maimed scores more, and eventually resulted in sweeping reforms for railroading across the country.

In the late 19th century, the United States was in its golden age of rail transportation. Public confidence in the railroads was at an all-time high, fueling self-assurance on the part of the railroad owners. However, underneath the facade of progress lay real issues and vulnerabilities. All it took was a bad wheel to make these flaws manifest. This episode will explore the Haverhill Bridge Wreck of 1888, its causes, its consequences, and why it was forgotten.

Key Points and Themes:

- The false sense of security.
- The disaster itself.
- Small flaws can lead to tragedy.
- Why was this forgotten despite the reforms?

ACT I: The Cold Open (0:00 – 1:30)

TRANSITION CUES

Establish the disaster scene through soundscape. For example: The howling of winter

wind, the sound of people shouting in the distance, muffled screams, wood creaking, steam hissing, etc. Fade to intro music.

- This would sound atmospheric, heavy, and gripping.

POINTS

1. **Immediate Horror**
   We immediately begin by exposing the audience to the horror of the immediate aftermath, but we don't explain why it has happened yet.
   a. Car #3 is lying on its side on the Merrimack River Bridge, and dangling over the water.
   b. Car #4 is off the tracks and crushed to splinters beneath a collapsed water tower.
   c. We establish a casualty count of 12 fatalities and around 30-40 injured.

2. **Transition**
   a. The Hook Line
   "What happened to turn a standard commute on an express train from Boston to Portland into a scene of tragedy?"

ACT II: The Illusion of Safety (1:30 – 3:30)

TRANSITION CUES

Establish a calm and sophisticated train atmosphere through sounds like the clickity clack of the wheels, the sound of muffled conversation and laughter etc.

- This would be soft and relaxing in tonal quality, creating a sense of comfort.

POINTS

1. **Train Travel as an Experience in 1888**
   We transition to the interior of the train before the disaster to give the audience a sense of what it was like to be aboard as a passenger that night.
   a. Describe the comforts of the passenger spaces.
   b. Discuss the speed of the train, and how 30mph would've felt secure, yet fast compared to slower contemporary methods like carriage, horse, and stage travel.
   c. Detail the feeling of security—how people of the time viewed passenger trains as a highly modern form of travel synonymous with human achievement.

2. **Contrast**

   Juxtapose with the truth by revealing the defects people did not think about.

   a. Carriages that were made from wood and held together by iron nails or bolts.

   b. The wheels being made from solid cast iron, which is prone to developing stress fractures and reacts to thermal stress (the winter weather).

   c. No real infrastructure planning—the flaw of having large railroad buildings and structures constructed only feet away from the tracks.

ACT III: The Butterfly Effect & Disaster Reconstructed (3:30 – 6:30)

TRANSITION CUES

A ***sudden transition*** marked by the snap of a wheel breaking and the subsequent sound of a train wreck: air brakes screeching, the boom of one car falling on its side, followed by scraping as it slides down the bridge—follow with the sound of the next carriage jumping the tracks and rolling down the hill before hitting the water tower and being crushed.

POINTS

1. **The Wheel Breaks**
   a. The train is nearing the bridge that spans across the Merrimack River when a wheel on the Smoking Car (car #3) shatters due to a microscopic crack exacerbated by the cold weather.
2. **The Derailment Proper**
   a. The smoking car jumps off the tracks and tips onto its side. It is dragged down the bridge by the locomotive and other cars before its coupling snaps, and it comes to a stop dangling over the side of the bridge.
   b. The derailment of the Smoking Car acts like a whip which flings Passenger Car #4 off the track, breaking its couplings, and sending it rolling down the hill towards a water tower and station house.
3. **The Second Tragedy**
   a. Car #4 plows through the station house killing 3 railroad workers inside. It stops when it collides with the water tower, which collapses on top of it, crushing it beneath tens of thousands of gallons of water and the cast iron tank.
4. **The Rescue Efforts**
   a. The engineer drives the rest of the train across the bridge into Haverhill Station, blowing the whistle continuously to sound an alarm.
   b. Nearby residents come out in droves with axes, lanterns, and tools to try to free the trapped survivors.

c. *** Victims of the disaster should be highlighted last.**

ACT IV: Press Coverage, Reforms & The Tragedy is Forgotten (6:30 – 10:00)

TRANSITION CUES

The sound of pencils writing and typewriters typing, the rustle of paper, fading out to somber music and the low howling of winter wind.

- Creates a foreboding and somber tone of sadness and finality.

POINTS

1. **Newspaper Headlines**
    a. Cite the media's comparison of this disaster to the Ashtabula River Railroad Disaster some 12 years prior, which horrified the public but caused no reforms.
2. **The Reforms**
    a. Discuss how this second disaster, for all the same reasons, finally was enough to cause changes and what those were.
        - The transition to metal carriages.
        - The restructuring of trackside infrastructure.
        - The quality of train wheels has improved.
3. **Why Was the Disaster Forgotten?**
    a. Overshadowed by subsequent larger events like the Great Blizzard of 1888 just two months later.
    b. The smaller death toll when compared to larger train wrecks or shipwrecks meant it wasn't "exciting enough" to be remembered.
4. **Closing**
    a. End with a poignant reflection that details how the safety of modern travel has been built on the sacrificed lives of everyday people from the past.

SOURCES

1. https://www.celebrateboston.com/disasters/haverhill-bridge-wreck.htm
2. https://digitalmaine.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=pdp_1888
3. https://digitalmaine.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=pdp_1888
4. https://www.pbswesternreserve.org/blogs/program-highlights/engineering-tragedy-the-ashtabula-train-disaster/