

Studies in Documents

Documenting Disaster: Photography at the Desjardins Canal, 1857

by JOAN M. SCHWARTZ*

On the evening of Thursday 12 March 1857, a little more than a mile outside Hamilton [Canada West, now Ontario], the westbound train out of Toronto plunged through a timber swing bridge on the Great Western Railway line and plummeted sixty feet into the Desjardins Canal. It was the worst railway accident in the history of the colony. Reckless journalists speculated upon the instability of bridges along the GWR line, but the mishap was, in fact, caused by a broken front axle which forced the locomotive to leave the track and drop onto the timbers of the bridge. The entire structure collapsed under the impact and the whole train broke through the gap. The engine and tender crashed through the frozen canal. The baggage car, striking a corner of the tender, was thrown to one side and fell about thirty feet from the engine. The first passenger car landed on its roof, breaking partly through the ice; the next passenger car fell on its end and remained that way.¹

Doctors were rushed to the scene from as far away as Toronto and rescuers worked through the moonlit night in search of bodies. By Friday noon, the death toll was approaching sixty. Most of those who escaped had been sitting in the rear of the second car. Among the dead were many prominent citizens — merchants, military men, and clergy. In the aftermath of the accident, the mails were delayed and freight traffic was interrupted. A day of public mourning was declared. Stores closed, parliament adjourned and an inquest was ordered. Photography played a key role in both the news coverage and official investigation of the event.

The public was voracious for news of the disaster. A week after the catastrophe, the Hamilton *Spectator* reported, "The demand for newspapers in this city, since the fatal occurrence of Thursday last, is without precedent in Canada."² An extra run of regular issues plus extra editions were produced to satisfy the public's appetite for details of the crash, reports of funerals and interments, and progress of the inquest. Not only written accounts, but also visual documentation of the accident scene had a ready audience. In the absence of illustrated newspapers, a spate of engravings hit the market, and it is clear that photography formed the basis of several of them.³

The lithographic view published by the proprietor of the *Morning Banner* (Figure 1) was credited to an "ambrotype by R. Milne."⁴ Hamilton artist Hardy Gregory produced two lithographs; one was credited "from a Daguerreotype by D.N. Preston" (Figure 2).⁵

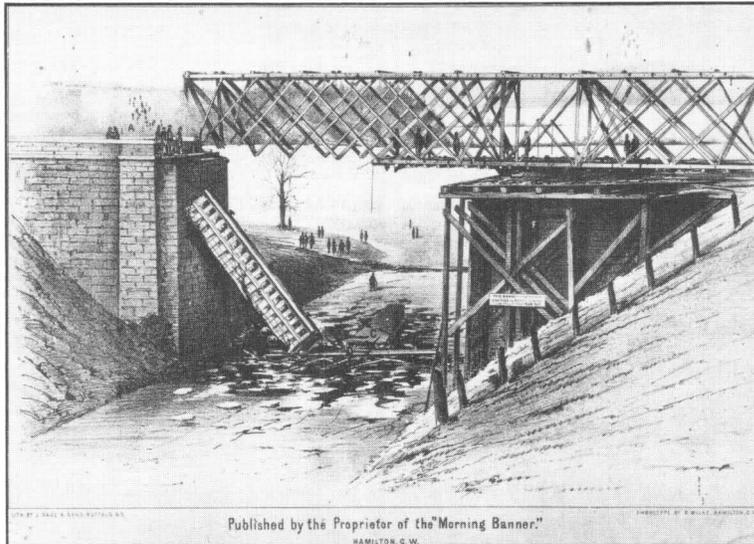


Figure 1: *Lithograph published by the Proprietor of the Morning Banner and printed by J. Sage & Sons, Buffalo, N.Y., from an "ambrotype by R. Milne, Hamilton, C.W."*. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, W.H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana, C-41060.

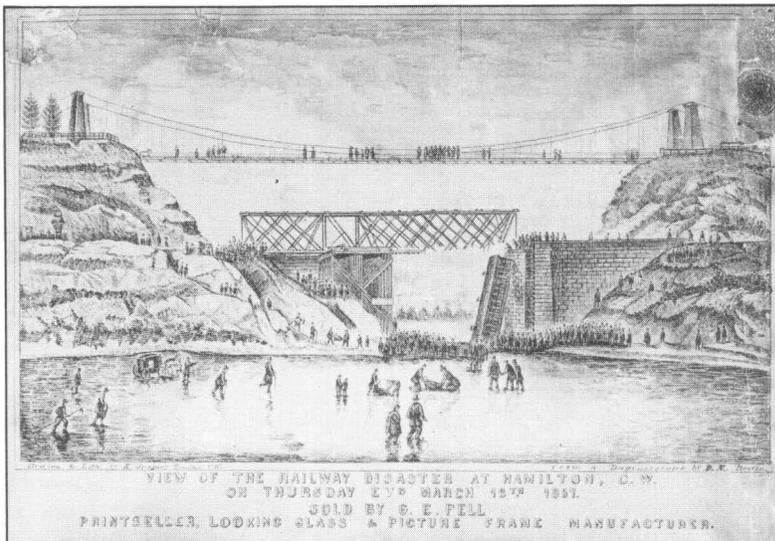


Figure 2: *"View of the railway disaster at Hamilton, C.W. on Thursday Eveⁿ March 12th 1857. Sold by G.E. Pell, Printseller, Looking Glass & Picture Frame Manufacturer. Drawn & Lith. by H. Gregory, Hamilton, C.W. from a Daguerreotype by D.N. Preston."* 99 × 171 mm image on 127 × 183 mm sheet. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-92477.

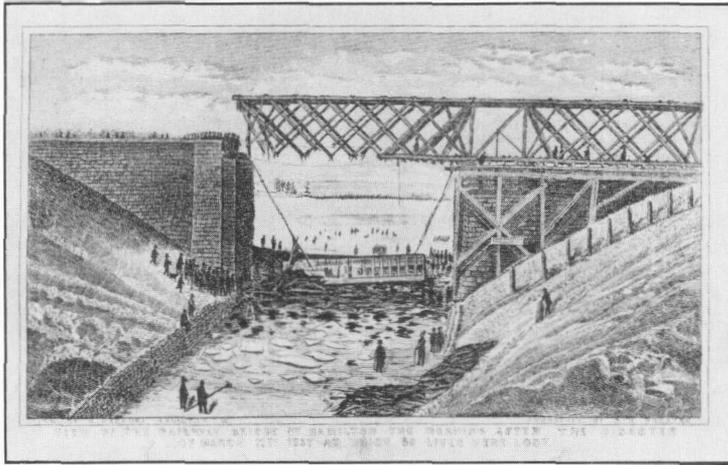


Figure 3: “View of the Railway Bridge at Hamilton the morning after the disaster of March 12th 1857 at which 59 lives were lost. Lith. by H. Gregory, Hamilton, C.W. [from an] Ambrotype by D.N. Preston.” From *Full Details of the Railway Disaster of the 12th of March, 1857, at the Desjardin Canal, on the Line of the Great Western Railway*. Hamilton: William A. Shepard & Co., 1857. 94 × 161 mm image on 126 × 185 mm sheet. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-121126.

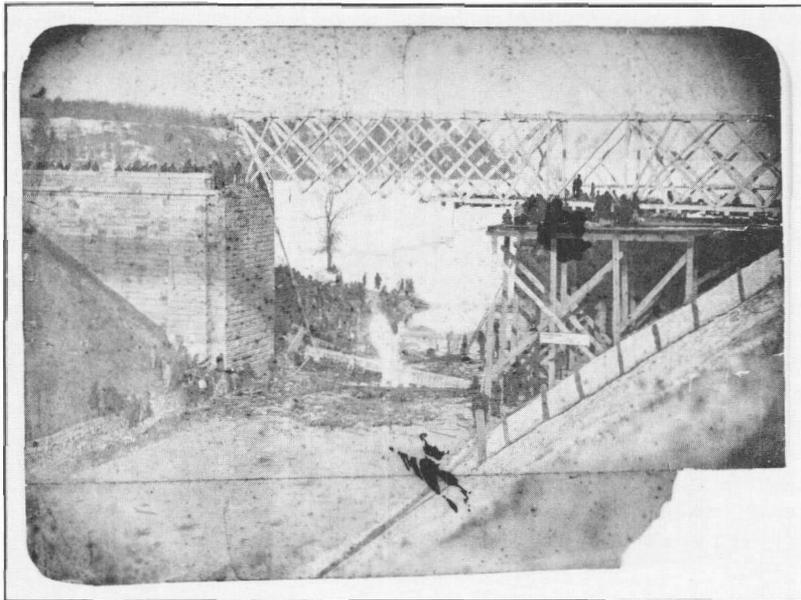


Figure 4: Salt paper print of the bridge over the Desjardins Canal near Hamilton, Canada West, after the accident of 12 March 1857. The photographer is not known; however, the vantage point is the same as the one chosen by Milne for his view published by the *Morning Banner*. 246 × 328 mm. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA-135158.

The other, from an "ambrotype by D.N. Preston" (Figure 3), accompanied the pamphlet *Full Details of the Railway Disaster of the 12th of March, 1857, at the Desjardin Canal, on the Line of the Great Western Railway*.⁶ Milne and Preston were established Hamilton photographers and both braved the blustery March weather to record the newsworthy occasion.⁷ One or the other was likely responsible for an unattributed salt paper print of the disaster scene (Figure 4) donated to the National Archives of Canada in 1982.⁸

An unnamed correspondent furnished a view of the disaster scene for publication in the *Illustrated London News* (Figure 5). This view, clearly based on a photograph, was published unattributed. However, the discovery of yet another view in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (Figure 6) has made it possible to identify the photographer. The engraving in *Frank Leslie's* appeared with the caption, "View of the Accident taken N.W. from Hamilton Bay, Suspension Bridge in the background. From a Photograph by D.C. Beere, Esq."⁹ A comparison of the two views shows the essential elements: the railway cars, the broken timbers of the railway bridge, the pylons and cables of the suspension bridge — to be the same. Even the pair of gentlemen in the right foreground are similarly placed — the one on the left in a wide stance with his back to the camera, the one on the right with a cane in his hand. A second group of onlookers appears to their left. Only the details embellished or edited by the hand of the engravers are different. The photographer was likely Daniel Manders Beere, who with partners William Armstrong and Humphrey Lloyd Hime constituted the well-known Toronto firm of Armstrong, Beere & Hime.¹⁰

Photography, however, served more than journalistic purposes. The initial use of photography "as a practical operational tool" by the Canadian Government appears to have followed the Desjardins Canal bridge disaster.¹¹ The local newspaper reported:

Photographs have been taken by Mr. Milne, under the order of Mr. Richards, of every important fracture in the timber of the bridge. Also of the Jury when engaged in examining the bridge, and of the reporter of the *Spectator* taking notes on that occasion.¹²

Mr. Richards was the barrister acting on behalf of the Crown under orders from an official of the Board of Works. The government was heavily involved in the construction and operation of railways and canals, and, in the investigation of the accident, photography was given a role in the documentation process. An account of the proceedings of the inquest into the disaster reported:

PHOTOGRAPHS. — The Photographs of the various parts of the bridge were here inspected by various of the Jurors. They are taken by Milne.... We are not aware that a similar use of Photography has ever been made before, and certainly it has never been pressed into the service of a Jury to the same extent.¹³

Milne's photographs were not only examined by the jurors in the course of the inquest but also incorporated into the report of the investigation into the causes of the disaster submitted to the Commissioners of Public Works by Frederick Preston Rubidge. Rubidge, a civil engineer who had been connected to the Department for fifteen years, "was instructed by the Assistant Commissioner of Public Works to examine the track and

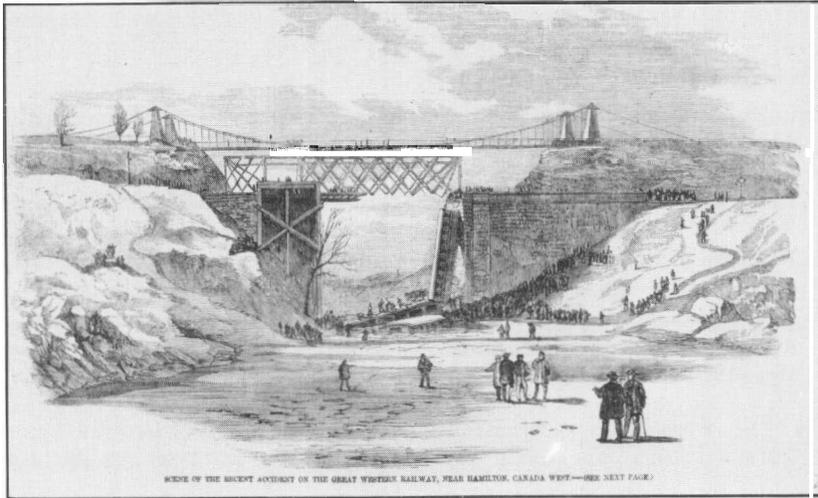


Figure 5: “Scene of the recent accident on the Great Western Railway, near Hamilton, Canada West,” *Illustrated London News*, 4 April 1857, p. 323 (bottom). The editors acknowledge at the conclusion of the accompanying text, “Frightful Railroad Accident in Canada” (p. 324): “We have to thank several correspondents for obligingly forwarding photographs and sketches of the above catastrophe, in addition to the original of the representation engraved upon the preceding page.” Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-1520.

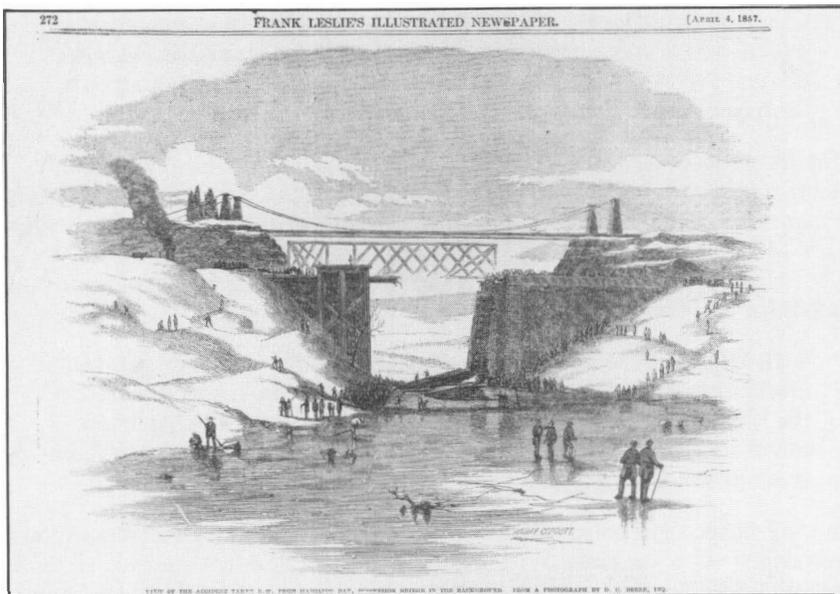


Figure 6: “View of the Accident taken N.W. from Hamilton Bay, Suspension Bridge in the Background. From a photograph by D.C. Beere, Esq.,” *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 4 April 1857, p. 272. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, PA-149269.

remains of the bridge, and report to the Government." His lengthy statement carried the postscript: "The accompanying plans, sketches and photographs, are referred to as illustrating many of the foregoing remarks."¹⁴

Photography was put to another pioneering use in the aftermath of the accident, and again Milne was the official photographer:

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE BODIES AS YET UNCLAIMED. — By orders of Mr. Brydges [Managing Director of the Great Western Railway], Mr. Milne, the Photographer, has sent a force of artists to the freight sheds with several sets of apparatus. They are taking likenesses of the unrecognized dead. This is a novel, and at the same time a most excellent plan, so that months or years hence, if any of the deceased should remain so long not identified, their friends may recognize them.¹⁵

The effectiveness of this ingenious scheme was never really tested for, by 2 April, the death toll stood at fifty-nine, and all but one of the victims had been identified before burial.¹⁶

Milne's views have long since disappeared; however, Milne's work became the centre of a controversy over the commercial value of photography when the matter of his reimbursement arose:

At the time of the investigation into the causes of the catastrophe at the Desjardins Bridge, in March last, a photographer residing at Hamilton, Mr. R. Milne, was employed by the Assistant Engineer of the Department, to make some photographs showing the fractures of some of the broken portions of the structure; ... for this Service, Mr. Milne sent in an account of £36.00, a Sum which appeared to be so exorbitant, that the Commissioners of Public Works declined paying it, and the claimant brought an action for the recovery of the Amount against Mr. Rubidge, the Assistant Engineer.¹⁷

The Department defended its decision and the action resulted in a verdict for the Plaintiff of £22.10.0; however, in true government fashion, court costs and professional fees more than offset the difference and, in the end, it cost a total of £41.0.3 to settle the issue of Milne's payment.

The railway disaster occasioned yet another innovative use of photography as a means of informing the general public.

THE MONUMENT. — Following up the suggestion we threw out for the erection of a monument to commemorate the never to be forgotten event of the 12th inst., at the Desjardin's Canal Bridge, Mr. A.H. Hills, Architect, of this city, has prepared a beautiful design, a daguerreotype of which has been taken by Mr. D. Preston, and now lies at this office for inspection.¹⁸

In 1857, images of railways, bridges, and disasters all commanded tremendous popular appeal and views of the Great Western Railway bridge disaster combined all three of these highly saleable subjects. At least two photographers took advantage of the commercial possibilities in the tragedy at the Desjardins Canal, and their work, despite the subject matter, was described with the prevailing rhetoric and enthusiasm usually accorded photographs by zealous newspaper editors. Referring to Milne's photographs of the

shattered bridge timbers the *Spectator* noted, “many of them are beautiful specimens of art.”¹⁹ The newspaper also advised its readers that “Mr. Milne will have for sale some most beautiful views of the scene of disaster.”²⁰

Clearly, the camera served several documentary purposes and, in so doing, demonstrated useful new applications of photography. The work of Milne and Preston on the occasion of this newsworthy railway disaster form the foundation of a documentary tradition in Canadian photography, a tradition greeted enthusiastically and subsequently sustained financially by government and public. If the actual photographs of the Great Western Railway disaster of 1857 have not survived, their significance in the history of photography in Canada is not diminished.

Notes

- * I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues at the National Archives of Canada, Richard Huyda, for sharing his research on early Canadian government photography and Tom Hillman, for his assistance in locating some obscure references in the records of the Department of Public Works, and to Margaret Houghton, Special Collections Archivist of the Hamilton Library Board who kindly offered valuable new information.
- 1 A description of the accident which appeared under the heading, “Fearful Catastrophe on the Great Western Railway. Awful Loss of Life,” in *The Semi-Weekly Spectator and Journal of Commerce* (Hamilton), 14 March 1857, p. 2, col. 7., probably first appeared in *The Daily Spectator* of 13 March 1857; however, to the great frustration of the author, pages 1 and 2 of the issue are missing from both the microfilm and original versions held in the National Library of Canada.
- 2 *The Daily Spectator* 18 March 1857, p. 3, col. 1; also *The Weekly Spectator*, 19 March 1857, p. 1, col. 1.
- 3 *The Daily Spectator* announced in its 16 March 1857 issue: “Sketch of the Disaster. A lithographed view of the fatal spot, as it appeared just after the dreadful catastrophe, is now in course of preparation, taken from a sketch by Mr. Rise of this city” (*The Daily Spectator*, 16 March 1857, p. 2, col. 8.) At the end of that week, an advertisement appeared: “Just Published!! A Beautifully Tinted Engraving of the Shattered Bridge! over the Desjardins Canal taken from the Bay” (*Ibid.*, 21 March 1857, p. 2, col. 8.) A few days later, the paper informed its readers: “The Late Disaster. Just published at this office, a Lithographic view of the scene of the late disaster at the Desjardins Canal Bridge, from an Engraving on stone by a first rate Artist” (*Ibid.*, 25 March 1857, p. 2, col. 7.) Yet another advertisement called attention to the fact that “The Late Catastrophe pamphlet [was] accompanied by [a] lithographic view of the scene [by] W. A. Shephard & Co.” (*The Semi-Weekly Spectator*, 28 March 1857, p. 1, col. 7.) This last advertisement refers to the view by Hardy Gregory reproduced as Figure 3 and mentioned in Note 6.
- 4 The *Morning Banner* was a newspaper published in Hamilton between April 1854 and the end of 1857 when it was superceded by *The Times*. Issued at first three times a week and then daily, the *Morning Banner* was variously known as the *Reform Banner and Railway Chronicle* and the *Daily Reform Banner*.
- 5 Hardy Gregory was an artist and engraver active in Hamilton between 1856 and 1865.
- 6 *Full Details of the Railway Disaster of the 12th of March, 1857, at the Desjardin Canal, on the Line of the Great Western Railway*, Hamilton: William A. Shepard & Co., 1857.
- 7 Robert Milne was listed as a daguerreotypist in Hamilton by the *Canada Directory* (published by John Lovell of Montreal) in 1851. David N. Preston first appears in Hamilton directories in 1853.
- 8 National Archives of Canada, Documentary Art & Photography Division, Charlotte M. Horner Collection, Photography Accession No. 1983-104.
- 9 The cover story of the 4 April 1857 issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* was titled, “The Terrible Railroad Massacre.” “A wide sweeping calamity has fallen upon the people of Canada,” the article began. “By the aid of the photographic art and the hand of genius, we present to our readers some of the most prominent incidents of this event.” (p. 265) In truth, only one of the twelve illustrations was based directly on a photograph.
- 10 Beere's photographic career is examined in the author's “Daniel Manders Beere,” *History of Photography: An International Quarterly*, 8, No. 2, (April-July 1984), pp. 77-82.
- 11 I am grateful to Richard J. Huyda for making available to me information on the use of photography by the Canadian government from his manuscript on photographer Samuel McLaughlin.

- 12 *The Daily Spectator*, 19 March 1857, p. 2, col. 3; also *The Weekly Spectator*, 26 March 1857, p. 2, col. 7.
- 13 *The Weekly Spectator*, 9 April 1857, p. 4, col. 2.
- 14 Rubidge's report was reproduced in its entirety in the pamphlet *Full Details of the Railway Disaster ...*, pp. 41-45.
- 15 *The Daily Spectator*, 16 March 1857, p. 2, col. 5; also *The Weekly Spectator*, 19 March 1857, p. 3, col. 5.
- 16 *The Weekly Spectator*, 2 April 1857, p. 4, col. 1.
- 17 National Archives of Canada, Executive Council of Canada, Minute Books (State Matters), RG 1, E1, vol. 81, p. 185, 20 November 1857; see also Records of the Department of Public Works, RG 11, Series A.3, Vol. 139, file 1609, 31 October 1857.
- 18 *The Daily Spectator*, 26 March 1857, p. 2, col. 5; also *The Semi-Weekly Spectator*, 28 March 1857, p. 1, col. 5.
- 19 *The Weekly Spectator*, 9 April 1857, p. 4, col. 2.
- 20 *The Daily Spectator*, 16 March 1857, p. 2, col. 5; also *The Weekly Spectator*, 19 March 1857, p. 3, col. 5.