



# The Staples and Covell Train Wreck of 1894

AN ANALYSIS SUPPORTING A LOCATION CORRECTION

Tom Eitnear  
2021

# Preface

The Staples and Covell train wreck of 1894 was a horrifying accident that left 7 men dead and 2 men injured. Several news articles were written immediately after the accident that sensationalized the event with gruesome details and conflicting/confusing information. Various newspaper articles revisited the event throughout the years after, particularly on anniversaries, and used historical information that continued to confuse.

Research of available information created a question regarding the accuracy of the train wreck location which is identified by a homemade marker placed in 1990. This research has concluded that the current marked location is incorrect, and is provided for all to peruse and draw their own respective conclusions.

A great deal of analysis was made using the Oceana County GIS interactive map (<https://oceana.mi.us/gis>), particularly the “Terrain with Labels” map located in the basemap gallery. This “Terrain with Labels” map is also known as the ESRI “World Light Gray Base” map. It provides excellent topographical relief which allowed for easy identification of key sites.

The only known photograph of the train wreck, as seen on the cover page of this document, was judiciously analyzed for inconsistencies with known information as well as information from newspaper articles and other publications. Some assumptions were required for completion of this analysis.



# The Logging Camp

The Staples and Covell logging camp was located near the section line dividing sections 35 and 36 of Shelby Township in Oceana County as seen in Figure 1. This camp, approximately 2.25 miles East of New Era, Michigan served as a base of operations for Staples and Covell to harvest marketable timber from their holdings in this area. The landscape in this area is marked by pothole swamps, deep valleys, steep hills, small lakes, and challenging terrain. The discerning eye can identify the old logging railroad grades that snake through this area.

The Staples and Covell logging railroad commenced near the White River in Muskegon County and provided a means to transport the marketable timber from the forests of Oceana County to the mills located on White Lake near Whitehall, Michigan. This line was constructed in 1887 and became operational that same year (“Death” The Montague Observer, April 12, 1894).

Logs were cut and piled near the railroad spurs during the winter months. When the grip of winter started to fade, the logs were loaded onto rail cars and transported to the rollways along the

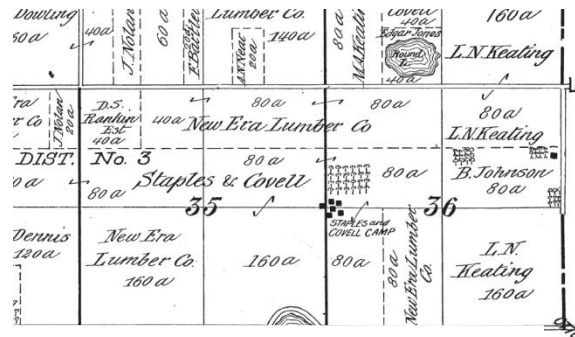


Figure 1. 1895 Atlas of Shelby Township

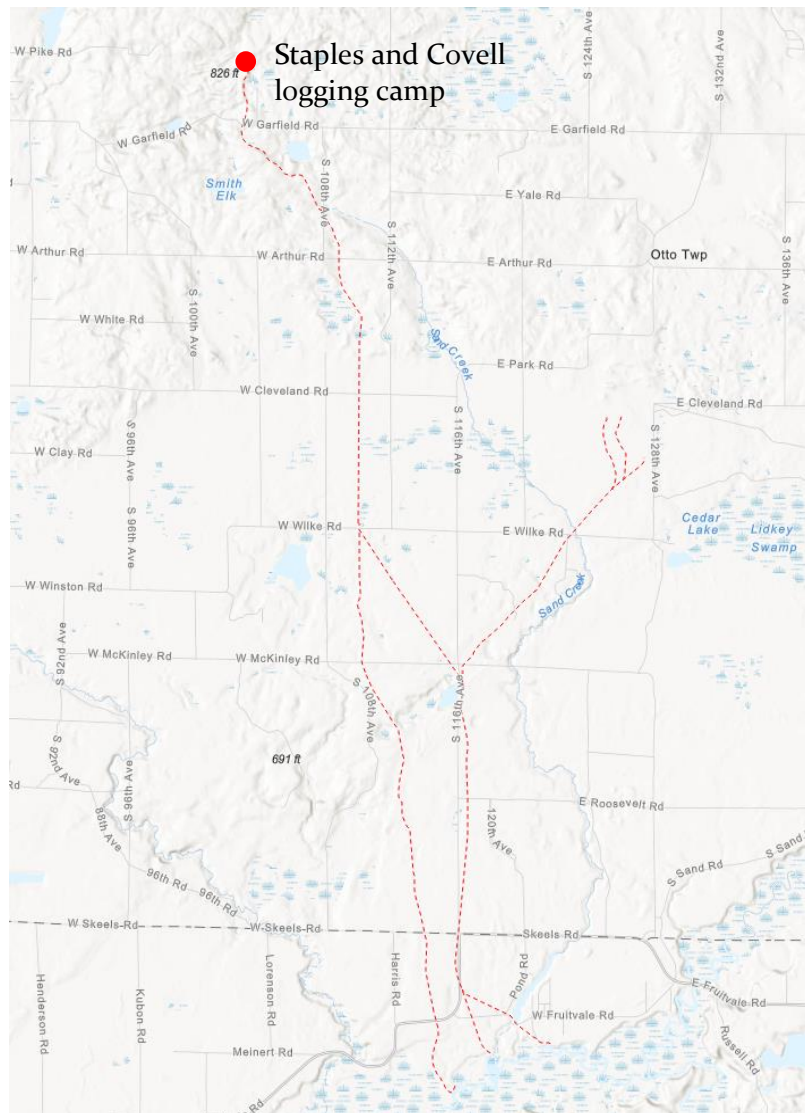


Figure 2. Staples and Covell logging railroad (partial)



White River where they were rolled into the river to take advantage of the copious water levels resulting from the spring melt and dam releases.



Figure 3. Staples and Covell log rollway at the White River

## The Accident

Monday April 9, 1894 was a blustery, rainy day with a strong wind blowing from the east (“Death” The Montague Observer, April 12, 1894). A nine man crew had just finished transporting a load of logs to the rollway and had crowded into the cab of the steam engine to head back to camp for some lunch. The cab most likely provided a respite from the weather conditions in which they had been working.

The steam engine was being operated in reverse which made it challenging, but not impossible to view what was in their path. The locomotive came around a gentle curve in the rail path and collided with the upper limbs of a tree that had been blown down. The nature of this curve was that it had a slight grade increase which hid the tree until they were approximately 250 feet from it. If the locomotive was traveling at the top speed of 25 mph (37 feet/second) they had less than 7 seconds to avoid a collision, assuming they had spotted the tree as soon as possible.

The limbs had fallen diagonally across the track (“Lumber Jack Memories.” Oceana County History 1992 Volume II, , “Death” The Montague Observer, April 12, 1894) and when the train made contact it was derailed and rolled down the side of the railroad grade, landing upside down. It is possible that the 8 ton locomotive would have moved the limbs aside with the front bumper, or pilot, if it had been traveling forward but since it was moving in reverse there was nothing to keep the limb from coming into contact with the wheels. The locomotive simply went up and

over the limb, possibly shifting the internal water supply, and its momentum carried it over the side.

The resulting impact broke off a steam pipe and the cab was immediately flooded with superheated steam. Hot embers from the firebox were also ejected into the cab, creating a horrible situation that all nine men were able to extricate themselves from under their own power or with assistance from other crew members. The injuries were fatal to seven of the crew, with the remaining two men bearing scars that would remain with them for the rest of their lives.

## The Marker

The November 6, 1990 edition of the Muskegon Chronicle ran an article authored by Barb Aardema describing the Staples and Covell train wreck of 1894 and how a Rothbury man created a monument to mark the location of the wreck. Henry Fischer, a local lifelong resident in the area, created a simple monument made of concrete and a 6 foot section of rail from the historical railroad. He placed this monument at a site where he thought the wreck occurred, and this site has been recorded at the Oceana County Historical Society headquarters as being located 650 west and 900 feet north of the southeast corner of section 35 of Shelby Township.

The Barb Aardema article describes how a “young” Henry was made aware of the wreck site:

**Anna and Albert Miller, a cook and worker in the lumber camp who later settled in the area had, told the young Henry Fischer where the wreck had occurred, and a newspaper photograph of the site had helped Fischer determine he had the right spot.**

Henry was born in 1912, eighteen years after the wreck occurred. It was probable that he never saw the actual rails or ties used in the construction of the railroad as it was a common practice for logging companies to remove the construction material for use in other areas once the timber resources had been exhausted. It is unknown at what age Henry learned of the wreck site but according to the article he was “young.”



Figure 4. Train wreck marker

For the purposes of this document, an assumption of 20 years of age will define the “young” Henry Fischer although it could easily be 10 years prior or after this age. One can calculate that Henry Fischer was 78 years old at the time he placed the marker, which would dictate that 58 years had passed since Anna and Albert Miller told him of the wreck site.

Armed with a newspaper photograph, Henry Fischer determined the crash site to be close to a trestle, which may have validated the information provided to him by the Millers so many years prior.

The October 8, 1970 edition of the Oceana Herald ran an article about the wreck and included a photograph of the wreck site. The August 13, 1989 edition of the Muskegon Chronicle

also ran an article about the wreck which also included a photo of the wreck...the same photo used by the Oceana Herald 19 years earlier. Both of these respective photos were cropped images and fail to show the far end of the trestle as compared to Figure 6 below.

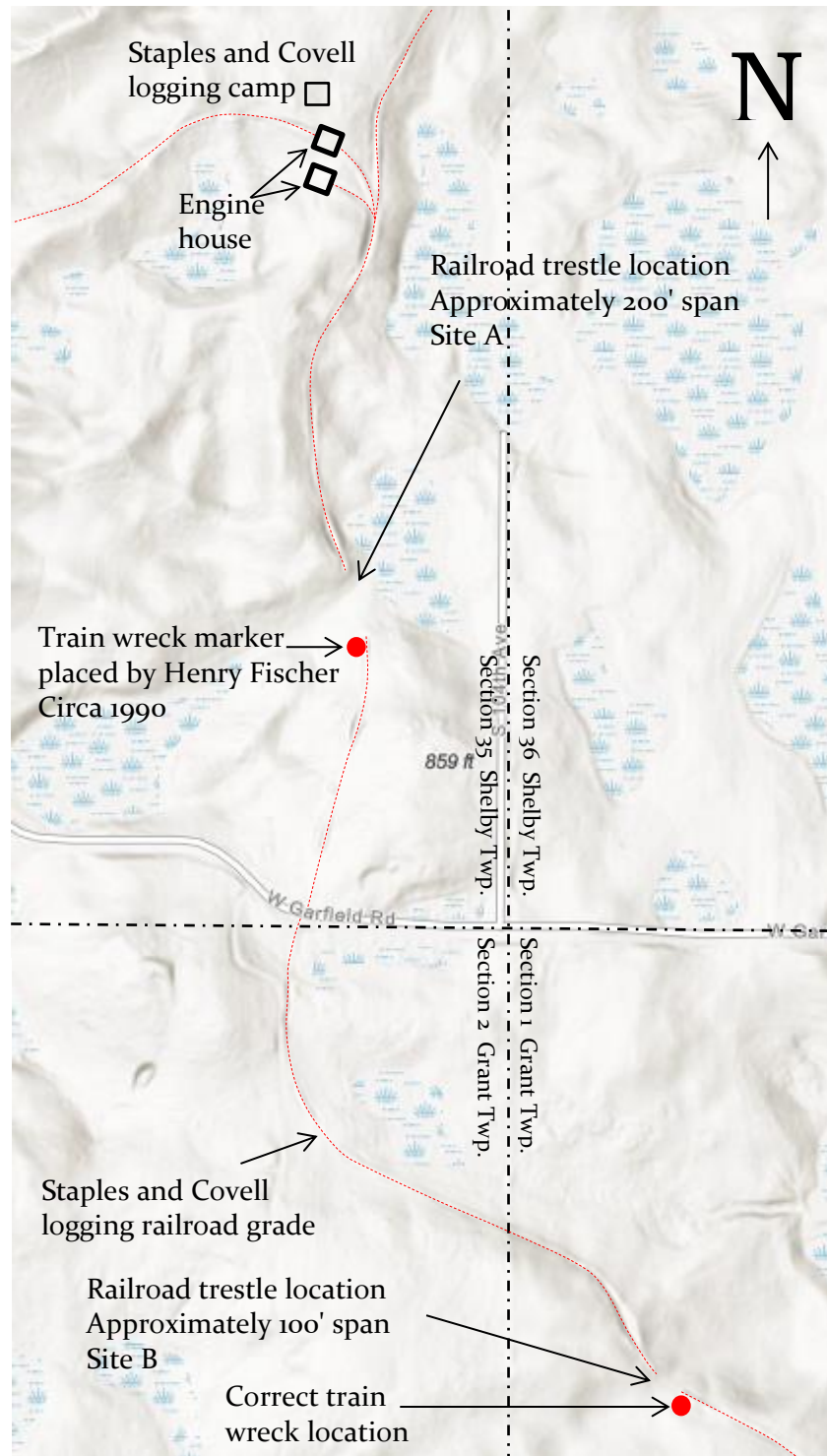


Figure 5. Trestle locations relative to the Staples and Covell logging camp





Figure 6. Train wreck photo showing the full trestle

It is probable that Henry Fischer had in his possession one of these newspaper photographs since research has not found any other newspaper printing of the wreck photograph prior to 1990, or for that matter any other photos of the wreck. Henry would have been unable to determine the length of the trestle using either of the newspaper photographs since the far end of the trestle was not shown respectively.

What Henry did know, based upon the photograph and what he was probably told by the Millers, is that the wreck occurred just prior to crossing a trestle. It was then a simple process to find the trestle, verify with the photograph, and place the marker. What Henry may not have known is that there was another trestle located approximately 2320 feet southeast of the marker.

## The Comparison

For comparison of the two trestle sites, the site marked by Henry Fischer shall be identified as Site A, and the other site shall be identified as Site B as seen in Figure 5. The trestle distance of Site A and Site B were measured using the Oceana County GIS website. Site A measured approximately 200 feet, and Site B measured approximately 100 feet as seen in Figure 7.

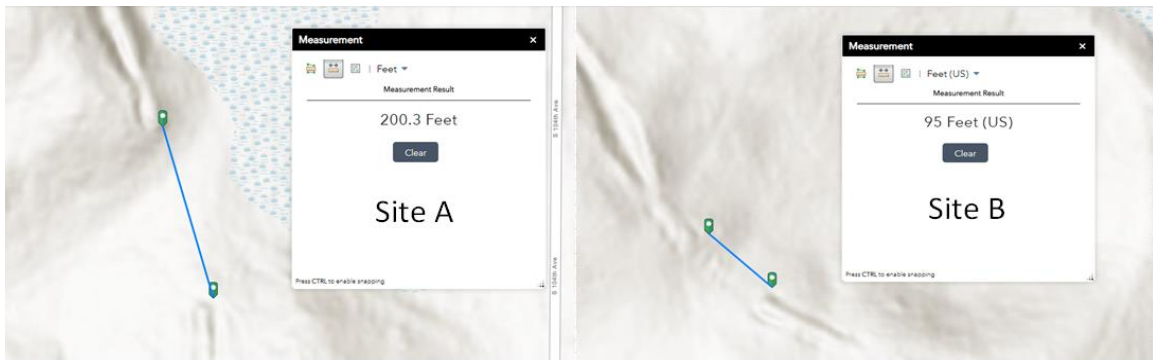


Figure 7. Trestle distance measurements, Oceana County GIS website

The location of the train wreck relative to the camp was reported in the following articles with little consistency:

- Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1894 “Fearful” (300 yards from camp)
- The Muskegon Chronicle, April 11, 1894 “Scalded to Death” (within sight of camp)
- The Whitehall Forum, April 12, 1894 “An Awful Doom” (300 yards away on the logging track)
- The Oceana Herald, April 13, 1894 “To Their Death” (80 rods from camp)
- The Oceana Herald, August 8, 1902 “Interesting Relic” (camp nearly a mile distant)
- The Whitehall Forum, February 4, 1897 “An Awful Doom” (about half a mile from Staples and Covell’s camp)
- The Oceana Herald, April 12, 1912 “Accident Recalled” (walked 80 rods to camp)
- Oceana County History Volume II 1992 “Lumber Jack Memories” (about 200 rods from camp)
- The Oceana Herald, April 1945 “Early April Tragedy Was Rate Worst” (about 80 rods from camp)
- The Montague Observer, April 12, 1894 “Death” (about one-half mile from the camps)

The inconsistent identification of the train wreck location caused confusion but the most compelling evidence that Site B is the actual wreck site is noticed when the trestle distances are compared to the train wreck photograph. The scale of the individuals in the photograph compared to the trestle length make it obvious that the trestle is not 200 feet in length, but may be more appropriately estimated to be around 100 feet, which would more closely match the measured distance shown in Figure 7.

Figure 8 shows an estimate of the trestle length utilizing the scale of one of the individuals in the photo. An assumption is made that the man at the far right in the photo is 6 foot tall. The outline of this man is reduced when moved to the trestle because the scale of depth increases as one moves across the trestle away from the locomotive. The farther along the trestle the outline is moved the smaller the outline would become.



The 6 foot segment measuring the height of the man is used to provide an estimate of the trestle length. The ends of the trestle are marked with a red line, and multiple 6 foot segments were placed end to end adjusting for the scale of depth. Fourteen segments made up the distance totaling approximately 84 feet, which is closer to the measured distance of Site B as noted in Figure 7.



Figure 8. Scale estimation of the trestle length

Another piece of compelling evidence is found by analyzing the angle of the photograph as seen in Figure 9. It was noted that a strong breeze out of the east was present the day of the train wreck. A tree was blown down and fell diagonally across the track (“Lumber Jack Memories.” Oceana County History 1992 Volume II, “Death” The Montague Observer, April 12, 1894).

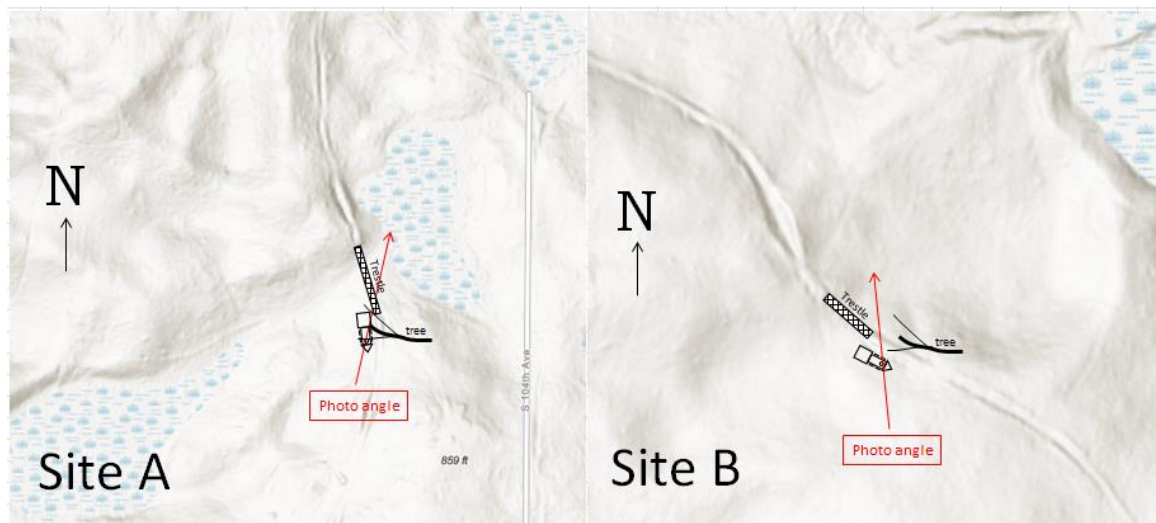


Figure 9. Blowdown tree estimated orientation to the track

The orientation of the track at Site A is nearly North/South and the strong east breeze would have blown the tree down nearly perpendicular to the track, whereas at Site B the breeze would have blown the tree down at an angle, or diagonally, to the track. This diagonally placed tree is evident in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Train wreck photo with the stump and tree identified

Close observation of Figure 10 shows a stump that may have kept the tree limb from being swept off to the side of the track upon collision. There is also a collision scar on the limb.

Additional evidence that Site B is the correct wreck location can be seen when examining the background horizon of the train wreck photograph. This horizon is identified by the red line in Figure 11. The horizon shows the sweeping hilltop of the background hillside. When the photograph angle is taken into consideration and compared to the relief map (Figure 12) it is evident that the sweeping hillside is present in the background at Site B. The background at Site A is characterized as a pothole swamp and is not evident in the train wreck photo.





Figure 11. Train wreck photo with the background horizon identified

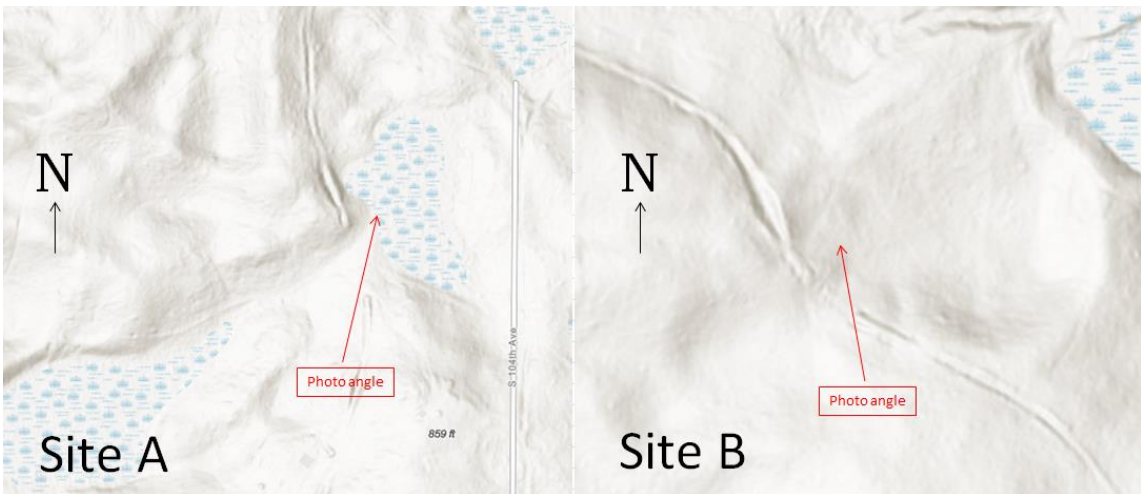


Figure 12. Train wreck photo angle background relief map

There is a slight amount of snow on the ground in Figure 11. Close observation shows some snow on the hillside in the background just beneath the red line. If this photo was taken at Site A there would not be any snow seen in the background because there was no sweeping hillside.

There is not a known witness to the accident but John H. Gillan who provided his recollection of the accident in 1933 (Lumber Jack Memories, Oceana County History 1992 Volume II) was the closest possibility of a witness.



The information provided by Mr. Gillan is probably the most accurate since he came upon the accident shortly after it happened and provided assistance to the victims. Mr. Gillan was employed by Staples and Covell and had taken off the morning of April 9, 1894 to search for a cow that had wandered away from his home the day before. Mr. Gillan lived 3 miles away and was searching for the cow that blustery morning when he heard the locomotive crash and the blowing off of steam. He said the train was about 200 rods (3300 feet) from camp when it rounded a curve and struck a birch tree that had fallen diagonally across the track.

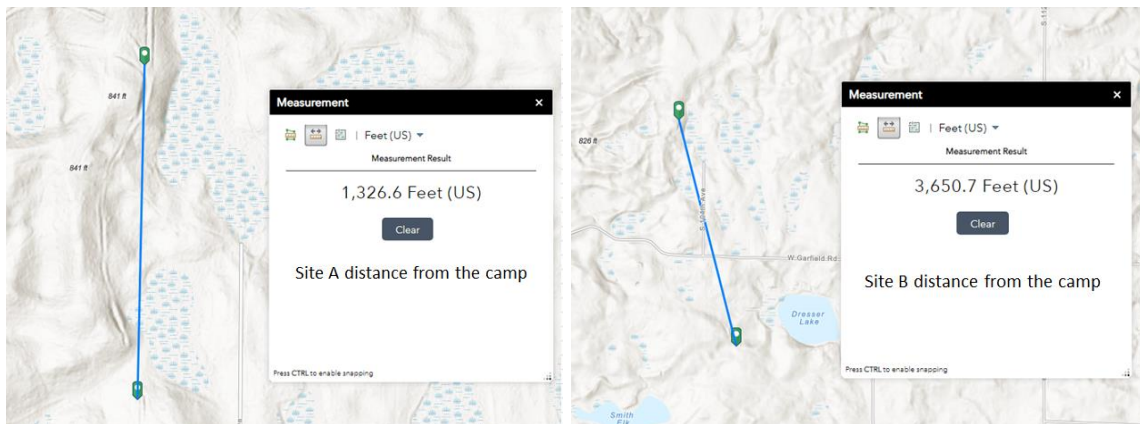


Figure 13. Train wreck site distance from the camp, Oceana County GIS

Site A measured approximately 80 rods (1326 feet) from camp, and Site B measured slightly more than 221 rods (3651 feet), which would make Site B the more probable site mentioned in Mr. Gillan’s testimony.

Mr. Gillan noted that one victim committed suicide at the wreck site due to his suffering, and that the rest of the victims all walked to camp with his assistance. Assuming they walked the track all the way back to camp from Site B they would have traveled approximately 4260 feet, or 0.8 miles.

Bits of information supporting Site B as the correct train wreck location can be found in various newspaper articles. Five different articles provided information that appears to support Site B as the site of the accident (*emphasis added*):

- The April 10, 1894 issue of the Chicago Tribune ran an article titled “Fearful” which claimed that one of the victims, Martin Lynch, “**walked nearly a mile when he fell dead.**”
- The April 10, 1894 issue of the Muskegon Chronicle ran an article titled “Locomotive Strikes a Tree...” and wrote “**Lynch, not- withstanding his awful condition, walked about a mile and then fell dead.**”
- The February 4, 1897 issue of the Whitehall Forum ran an article titled “The New Era Case” and it wrote “The scene of the accident, which occurred April 9, 1894, was located near New Era, in Oceana County, **about half a mile** from Staples and Covell’s camp.”
- The August 8, 1902 issue of the Oceana Herald ran an article titled “Interesting Relic” which wrote “All of the men crawled through one of the cab windows, and all but one -- Anderson-- lived to walk back to camp, **nearly a mile distant.**”

- The April 12, 1894 issue of the Montague Observer ran an article titled “Death” which wrote “**About one half mile** from the camps there is a sharp curve in the track, and this curve is in a deep cut, at which place a tree had been blown across the rails.”

## Conclusion

Henry Fischer should be commended for his actions to honor the memory of the men who lost their lives in the train accident. The construction and placement of the marker was an honorable action.

There is an ample supply of conflicting information to be found in newspaper articles printed after the accident and years thereafter. The best evidential information is the actual train wreck photo since it can only be interpreted at face value, and is not reliant on third party authenticity.

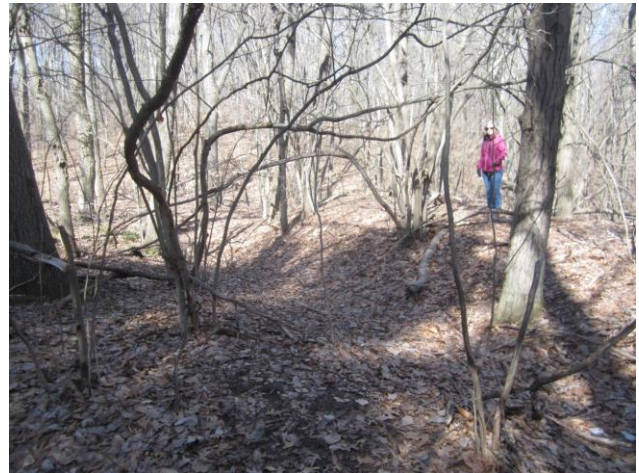
This document has provided evidence that the correct location of the infamous train wreck is Site B which is described as 420 feet East, and 1400 feet South of the southeast corner of section 35 of Shelby Township, Oceana County, Michigan. A more precise description of the wreck location is:

Latitude 43.552674 N

Longitude -86.295529 W



April 1894



March 2021