

# ENGINEERING TRAGEDY

THE ASHTABULA TRAIN DISASTER



## THE "TITANIC" OF ITS TIME A TRUE STORY



Len Brown  
Beacon Productions  
(M) 330-415-5120  
[len@beaconproductions.com](mailto:len@beaconproductions.com)

Length:  
120 Minute Documentary (Men & Women 25 - 54)  
Or  
Three Part Mini Series (Men & Women 25 - 54)



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## THE ASHTABULA TRAIN DISASTER

[www.EngineeringTragedy.com](http://www.EngineeringTragedy.com)

### Logline:

On December 29, 1876, the flawed Ashtabula Bridge collapsed during a raging blizzard and brought down train #5, the Pacific Express. The horrible crash and fire that killed 95 and injured 75 was the "Titanic" of its day and became the backdrop for a national debate between public safety and the relationship between big business, government and the public.

### Length:

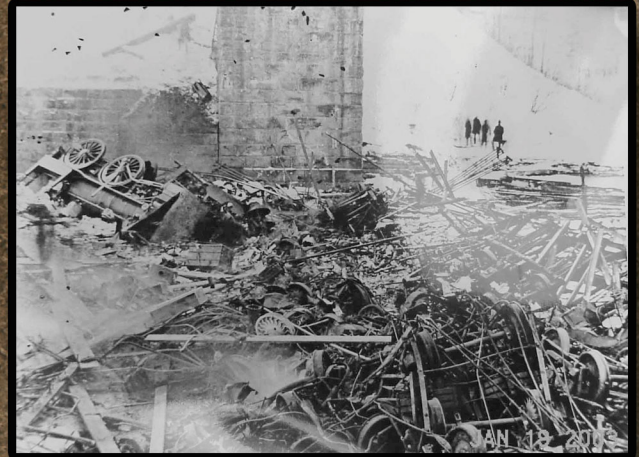
**Option #1 - 120 Min. Scripted Documentary**

**Option #2 - Scripted Three Part Mini Series**

### Demographics:

120 Minute Scripted Documentary (Men & Women 25 - 54)

Three Part Scripted Mini Series (Men & Women 25 - 54)



### SYNOPSIS

Engineering Tragedy: The Ashtabula Train Disaster will be the first documentary ever produced about the worst train and bridge disaster of the 19th century. It was an event that shocked the nation and became a transforming event in American History.

It happened in Ashtabula, Ohio on December 29, 1876 during a raging blizzard. In this town off the shores of Lake Erie an all-iron railroad bridge collapsed sending one of the most luxurious trains to ever ride the rails (train No.5 - The Pacific Express) plummeting 70ft into a frozen river. Of the 170 souls that were onboard only 75 survived, most with serious injuries. Of the 95 who perished, 47 were identified and 48 were unidentifiable due to the raging fire that followed the crash.

The Ashtabula Bridge was built and collapsed in the historical context of the tension between unbridled capitalism, represented in the rise of the first big business in America, the railroad. This was a time of great industrial growth and technological development; people were both fascinated and fearful of the many new innovations that were claiming to make their lives easier. However, the lack of regulatory oversight of steam trains, steam ships and bridges, coupled with experimentation and huge expansion, led to an accident rate that aroused great alarm in the American public. It also created the first transportation psychological diagnosis "Rail Spine or Rail Neurosis (the fear of riding trains). Plus, for the first time in American history the country was not being led by elected politicians, but by the captains of industry.

The loss of ninety-five lives in a small city off the shores of Lake Erie stunned the entire nation! Ashtabula forced our nation to look at safety issues because of the public outcry brought about by the national press. This was not just one more railroad accident or bridge failure; it was a foreshadowing of the coming Populist Movement of 1891. People were demanding government take action regarding the railroad's abysmal safety record. Changes were made and laws were passed because of Ashtabula. This disaster was also crucial moment that fueled change in the relationship between big business, government, and the public.

This documentary explores a number of topics to include: The societal, cultural, and political stage of the mid-nineteenth century, along with the social and political classes of the day and how they affected technology and industrialization. We explore how Americans looked at authority during this time and how this authority was challenged. We investigate how new technology was creating new opportunities for women and minorities including Charles Leek, America's first African American telegraph operator, who was on duty the night of the disaster. We also look at how this disaster led to the suspected murder of the railroad's civil engineer, Charles Collins, and the eventual suicide of the railroad's president, Amasa Stone.



**Amasa Stone**  
Bridge Designer  
Committed Suicide



**Philip Bliss**  
Famous Hymn Writer  
Died With His Wife



**Charles Leek**  
Hero & First  
African American  
Telegraph Operator



**Marion Shepard**  
Heroine of  
Disaster



**Charles Collins**  
Murdered After  
Testifying

**Contact: Len Brown (Beacon Productions) 2827 Sickels Circle SE, Massillon, OH 44646**  
**Email: [len@beaconproductions.com](mailto:len@beaconproductions.com) PH: 330-415-5120**