

**Bureau of Mines Bulletin 586:
Historical Summary of Mine
Disasters in the United States
Volume - 1 - Coal Mines
1810-1958**

**August 14, 1871; Eagle Shaft (Anthracite),
Pittston, Pa.; 17 Killed**

*(From the Miners' Journal, Pottsville, Pa., Aug. 19,
1871, and the Philadelphia Public Ledger, Aug. 16,
1871)*

About 10 o'clock in the morning an explosion of firedamp in the Eagle shaft killed all the men in the inner workings of the pit. Men at the foot of the shaft heard the explosion and felt the shock and a harmless gust of air. They went into the gangway to see what might be done for those inside and found one body outside a fall of rock that blocked the passage. Hope was given up for the lives of the others. Rescuers dug through the fallen rock but could not get inside until they put out the fire in the furnace and turned water down the shaft. Some of the brattices that were destroyed were replaced to provide enough air to reach the bodies which were brought out by the night of August 15. It was thought that a fall forced gas out of worked places onto the open lights of the workers. The shaft was sunk in 1856 and the mine nearly worked out. Gas was very troublesome. One of the men killed had been the only survivor of an explosion that killed 5 men in this mine in 1860.

August 14, 1871

DEATH IN THE MINES.

Another Fearful Explosion in
a Pennsylvania Colliery.

PITTSTON AGAIN IN MOURNING.

Twenty Men and Boys Killed by
Noxious Vapors.

Search for the Victims—The
Tomb of Death.

FIVE BODIES ONLY RECOVERED.

Perils of the Mines—More Fire
Damp Discovered.

Providential Escape of the Rescuers from a
Terrible Fate.

PITTSTON, Pa., August 14, 1871.

Scarcely has the smoke cleared away from the smouldering embers of the West Pittston breaker—the scene of the late mine disaster—when twenty healthy, robust men and boys perish in a few hours in a tomb the mouth of which was enveloped in flames that licked the very heavens—before our valley is again alarmed with a like startling announcement, “The Eagle mine has exploded!” Scarcely have the agonizing groans of the dying victims of the West Pittston disaster faded away—and before the tears of the widowed and orphaned have dried up—when our valley is alarmed with the astounding and heart-sickening intelligence that another accident of fearful dimensions has torn from the fond and dotting hearts of endearing parents, wives, brothers and sisters a score of noble miners who descended into the pit, trusting in the hope that man’s precaution would never err, and for a meagre recompense risked their existence and their families’ happiness: but, alas! “man proposes, God disposes.” This morning, at about eleven o’clock, the astounding intelligence was heralded throughout the valley that an accident involving

THE LIVES OF TWENTY MEN AND BOYS had occurred at the Eagle shaft. The HERALD reporter immediately repaired to the scene, on the east bank of the Susquehanna River, about a mile south of Pittston and about a mile east of the West Pittston calamity. When your reporter arrived already the heart-rending shrieks of children and women filled the atmosphere and pierced the heart of every anxious watcher at the top of the shaft. The disaster occurred at about half-past nine o’clock.

EXPLOSION OF GAS IN THE MINE.

So great has been the constant accumulation of gas in this mine, and especially in the main road known as the Rock Tunnel that it has been confined in pipes and turned, both for safety’s sake and for light to the miners. The shaft and breaker over the shaft remaining undisturbed and intact, I immediately descended into the mine. At the foot a few men were conducting the transit of the cars as they ascended and descended with laboring men and necessary articles for the rescue of the men. At this early period but few miners had prospected back into the mine, and they with safety lamps. I was told that the journey was exceedingly perilous to life and attended with dangers: that should the slightest variation of the air courses take place before the men with lamps could be made acquainted with it the gas would

ENVELOP US IN A PLUME

from which no human efforts could extricate us. With the safety lamp I determined to procure for the readers of the HERALD the best and most reliable details of the accident. I pursued my way, in company with a guide, through the rock tunnel, where the gas had previously to the accident been burned in a pipe, but now only debris of wooden brattice and pillars to hold up the roof were visible. On every hand the unmistakable marks of a devastating element, moving with tremendous fury, were demonstrated. Before we reached the point where the first man, Benjamin Davis, was found, a corps of rescuers passed us with his dead body in their arms. He showed no signs of being burned, but bore upon his features much the same resemblance of having been suffocated with what is known among the miners as “afterdamp.” On pushing our way back some eight hundred feet we came to a company of miners and citizens, who are familiar with mines and the workings of gas, among whom were Superintendent Anderson Bryden, of the Pennsylvania Coal Company’s works; Mr. Burgess, Joseph Schooley and James Bryden, all ably assisting in the preparations for a further prosecution of the search. Superintendent Bryden, assisted by a number of ready and self-sacrificing miners, stepped forward in the gloomy vault, with a faint light glimmering through the gauze of the safety lamp, and disappears. A breathless silence prevails, for we are already in

THE TOMB OF THE DEAD.

and do not know but by some unforeseen casualty the gas still unexploded in the mine may take fire, and if it does every one of us who has ventured before the mouth of the shaft will close his eyes forever in death. After an absence of about a quarter of an hour a man returns with the information that another man, the second, Evan Jones, has been found in much the same condition as Davis, but lying in a position that would indicate that after the explosion he had made an effort to reach the shaft, but had been overtaken by the afterdamp. He is taken to the mouth of the shaft, and amid the cries and weeping of women and men of strong hearts he is conveyed to a shelter near by.

August 14, 1871

Death in the Mines - cont.

THERE ARE NO HOPE

of any of the men escaping with their lives, and the exact facts connected with the circumstances will forever remain a mystery. Inspector Blewett has just arrived at the mine. The only two persons in the mine at the time of the explosion were Henry Harris, fire boss, and Thomas Tucker, footman. Mr. Harris tells us that his first knowledge of the catastrophe was the tremendous rush of the whole volume of air in the tunnel to the foot of the shaft where he and Tucker were, knocking them down and about, and so strong was the current that it blew off his hat up the shaft to the top. The men at work in the labor of rescuing the victims complain of being exhausted when they return from the gangway, where the air is very impure, and the men are supported to the tunnel, where they are revived and now refresh are ever ready to assume the arduous task of

BEARING DEATH IN THE VERY FACE.

The following is a list of the men who are in the mine, so far as I am able to ascertain names:—David Harris, a son of the fire boss, is a widower, with eight children; James Morgan, has a family; Tho. Leyshon, wife and four children; Evan Jones, wife and six children; David Owens, wife and two children; Thomas Reese, wife and four children; James Jones, wife and four children; Benjamin Davis, wife; Robt. Hughes, Ben. Williams, Edw. Owens, runner; John Morgan, driver; Richard Owens, son of David Owens; M. Quimley, laborer; Martin Mangan, driver. The only theory advanced now for the explosion is that there probably occurred a fall of rock in some old heading where gas had accumulated, and driving it out into the gangways where the miners were at work it became ignited, resulting in the second terrible and mournful calamity.

EVENING AT THE MINES.

The work of rescuing the men entombed in the fated Eagle Mine has been steadily pursued for the whole day, and still the efforts of the laborers are only partially successful. Around the mouth of the shaft a police force has been on duty to keep the crowd from rushing forward and interfering with the uninterrupted passage of lumber, water, coffee and provisions to the men below. On the top, Drs. Gorham, Nye and

Becker, Underwood, Hartman, Seaman and Barnes have been awaiting the definite word that shall declare the fate of the men. Dr. J. N. Tier has been in the mine with the pioneers all day, attending to the physical necessities of the exhausted miners as they are carried back from the chambers, which are still full of the afterdamp. The Inspector has been in the mine exploring for men and superintending the erection of air passages during most of the afternoon. The explosion broke down nearly every brattice and air passage between the foot of the shaft and the place where the men still in the mine are supposed to be. The work of rebuilding this brattice and reconstructing the division line between the pure and impure passage is extremely difficult, slow and hazardous. Your reporter has just arrived from the bottom and was one of the last gang of men that has examined the condition of the mine. We entered further into the mine by 200 feet than any parties have yet been. The air is very suffocating—so much so as to compel us to retire—and before we reached the rock tunnel, where fresh air is abundant, two of the party succumbed to the deleterious effects of the noxious gases. We, however, have discovered that there are two falls of coal in the gangway, within thirty feet of each other, the first one barely leaving space enough to allow the passage of a man's body. The second fall is a close barrier to further progress until it is cleared away, and this will take hours yet to consummate. The air within these two falls is certain suffocation.

FIVE MEN ALTOGETHER HAVE BEEN FOUND.

Benjamin Davis, Evan Jones, Theodore Leyshon, James Morgan and David Harris, all dead, but having the appearance of dying from the inhaling of afterdamp. Their clothes are not injured, as likely to be the case if they had perished from a concussion of the rushing of air or explosion of gas. In the immediate vicinity of the men, near to the first stopping place mentioned in my despatch this afternoon, is a heading in which has been discovered

TWELVE FEET OF EXPLOSIVE GAS.

and in close proximity to the passage where men have been engaged with naked lamps nearly all day. Had this gas been ignited the Herald would have had to get its report from some more fortunate scribe, and would have added undoubtedly to its list of deaths a full score more who are making almost superhuman efforts to snatch from death the trophy of another victory. One of the greatest barriers to the investigation into the chambers and gangways is the absence of any one who is acquainted with the mine. The fire boss and footman have both exhausted their physical endurance and been conveyed to their homes. This leaves no one to lead the way into the mysterious labyrinth where there is scarcely a hope of finding a single life to tell the tale. Superintendent William Abbott has been present during the afternoon lending the aid of his experience in ferreting out the difficulties that prevent the free and uninterrupted passage of pure air to and fro. It will probably be far beyond midnight ere any new light will be thrown upon the situation.

By order of the Inspector, at about eight o'clock all the volunteers were recalled from the mine, after which water was pumped into the mine, hoping thereby to exclude the foul air and force pure air in. The casting water down has ceased, and Inspector Blewett and Superintendent W. W. Kenrick are down making explorations.

THE PITTSTON MINING HORROR.

Success of the New Efforts to Ventilate the Mine.

Eleven More Bodies Recovered.

EIGHTEEN LIVES SACRIFICED.

Have the Mines Been Duly Inspected?

A CORONER'S INQUEST BEING HELD.

Pittston, Pa., August 15, 1871.

After sending my last special despatch to the HERALD relative to the great disaster of Monday morning I returned to the mine to watch events and observe the efforts made to ventilate those places where it was positive death to remain any considerable length of time. In these places the gas and choke damp were rapidly increasing, and every moment of delay increased the difficulty of reaching the men. It was found, after experimenting for some time, that the course pursued for conducting air into the gangway where the men were supposed to be must be changed, as there was no success in getting up a current. Therefore the bracing of another gangway was opened, and the gangway first used was closed up. This new air course proved to be successful. By two o'clock the air was comparatively pure, and the exploration party set out upon their hazardous undertaking of FINDING THEIR LOST BROTHERS.

By a circuitous route they succeeded in getting behind the two falls of coal spoken of in my despatch of yesterday, and in this place and vicinity the remaining eleven men were found. They were all taken to their respective homes, and this morning placed in coffins.

The shaft this morning presents a picture of mournful aspect. Now and then a visitor from abroad comes, who has travelled from New York and Philadelphia expressly to view the scene, and others who are merely chance visitors are to be seen going to and returning from

THE MOUTH OF THE SEPULCHRE.

Others linger near by, while an old miner watches the shaft with bowed-down, meditating mien. A low murmur sounds as harsh and out of place as a laugh at a funeral, and a feeling of deep mourning pervades the whole atmosphere. There are no buildings in close proximity to the shaft, but it is bounded on the west by the Susquehanna River and on the three other sides by the Oregon grove. The surroundings of the shaft and the slow movements of the visitors as they tread about with hanging heads, are themes for solemn and beneficial meditation.

THE MINES HAVE NEVER BEEN INSPECTED.

I have learned from Mr. Alva Tompkins, the operator, that neither Inspector Blewitt nor his predecessor, Inspector Nichols, have ever been down into the mines. This may be damaging evidence against the inspector upon the Coroner's inquest, if it be considered that there was any negligence upon the part of the operator or inspector in providing proper ventilation. I learned from a superintendent of a mine in this district that Inspector Blewitt has been particularly careful in ferreting out the causes of accidents, and has not paid the attention to the ventilation requirements of the law that is deemed essential.

THE INQUEST.

The Coroner (Dr. P. J. O'Malley) empanelled a jury, and viewed the bodies of the deceased to-day. The following are the names of the jury and their occupations:—O. F. Games, citizen; Professor J. W. Bruce, citizen; Andrew Bryden, mine superintendent; Thomas Smiles, mine superintendent; John Lewellyn, miner; Enoch Cartwright, miner.

After viewing the bodies the Coroner adjourned the inquest until Friday morning, at ten o'clock, to give ample time for the Miners' Association to appoint a committee of experienced miners and engineers to examine the mine, and, if possible, solve the mystery of the origin of the accident. I interviewed Inspector Blewitt, who seems to be a gentleman very anxious to have nothing go for facts until they are satisfactorily proven to be such, and desires that justice be done. He does not seem to imagine that the verdict of the jury might turn out to be an

INDICTMENT AGAINST HIM FOR NEGLIGENCE, and we have heard one prophecy that it would. But should it be substantially proven that the mine was not properly ventilated, who must bear the odium of such negligence? In his conversation with me he said, "I shall hold an investigation into the matter of the accident if the Coroner does not. I am anxious that there be a thorough examination into the causes by an investigation by the proper authorities. I am not satisfied what caused the accident. I have no doubt there was an explosion of gas, but I am not confident as to its origin. It may have been produced by a fall of the roof in some of the old workings and forced the fire-damp down into the gangways, where it was undoubtedly ignited, or there was an unlooked-for accumulation of gas in some of the gangways frequented by the drivers and runners." These propositions are also advanced by Superintendents Law and Bryden and mining boss Smiles.

The boy drivers and runners were badly burned. John Mangan, sixteen years of age, was scorched so badly as to be hardly recognizable. He also had both arms broken—an incident that is unaccounted for, as far as I am aware. The mine was being worked under the provisions of the Safety law. The mine boss told me that he had been in the mine twice on Monday morning and found everything all right. I understand that it is the custom and duty of the mine boss to investigate the condition of the mine every morning. I think the men died from

SUFFOCATION FROM CHOKO DAMP, a gas that accumulates always after an explosion and being heavier than air, lies on the bottom of the mine. It is certain death if inhaled in the lungs to any extent. I do not believe the men died from any other element. The driver boys that were burned might have become insensible from the explosion of the gas, they bearing the evidences of being where the gas exploded, and after falling to the ground were enveloped in the gas and perished. There is no evidence that I know of to support the theory that the men died of a concussion of rushing air at this place. The men when found were not lying in a position to indicate they survived for any considerable length of time after the explosion. They lay in groups, much as they might have been in at the instant that the explosion occurred. The son of David Owen (Richard) lay in his father's arms when found. Richard was burned, but his father was not. The footman, Tucker, and mine boss, Henry Harris, are the only ones that have escaped, and though they may not be able to elucidate the origin of the explosion, they may be able to throw some light upon the subject as to the cause and where the blame lies, if anywhere.

The funerals will be held to-morrow. The services will be very impressive, and business will be suspended in Pittston. The Odd Fellows and temperance societies will take part in the obsequies.

FIRE-DAMP AGAIN.

Explosion in Eagle Shaft,
Pittston, Penn.

Seventeen Miners Shut Up in a
Gangway.

The Work of Removing the
Obstructing Rocks.

Foul Air Impedes the Progress of
the Relief Parties.

All Hope of Saving the Miners in
the Shaft Lost.

Recovering the Bodies of the Un-
happy Victims.

Special Dispatch to the New-York Times.

PITSTON, Penn., Aug. 14.—This morning, at about 10 o'clock, it was rumored that the fire damp in the Eagle shaft had exploded, warning in the miners and laborers employed there, numbering seventeen in all. At the scene of the disaster, where there were at least 1,000 people assembled, many of whom had relatives or friends at work in the mine, the grief of the women was beyond description. They crowded about the mouth of the shaft, and the air was filled with their heartrending lamentations. Preparations to descend the shaft were immediately made, and at 10:35 o'clock about twenty men descended, and after a quarter of an hour of anxious waiting they reappeared, bringing the body of BENJAMIN DAVIS. He was found near the foot of the shaft, and was lying on his face, dead. JOSEPH JONES, a driver, was also found at the foot of the shaft. He was alive, and did not seem to have suffered a great deal, although he was deathly pale. Work was rapidly continued and at 12:40 the body of EVAN JONES was found in the south gangway, about 800 feet from the foot of the shaft, and lying face upward. The features were distorted, and he presented an appearance of great suffering. At this time the

wildest confusion prevailed, and the women who had husbands, children or friends working in the shaft were eagerly pressing forward to learn their fate. The work of removing the rock and *débris* caused by the explosion inside the shaft, and which debarred the workmen from the place where most of the men were supposed to be, progressed very slowly, but as fast as was possible under the circumstances. The air was so foul and deadly that it was only with great difficulty that the men could breathe, and only those who were accustomed to the mine could be of any service. At 3:35, the body of THOMAS LESHONG was brought up. He died, judging from the appearance of his countenance, a very painful death. He leaves a wife and four children, and was about forty years of age. A gentleman who had been down in the mine since 11 o'clock in the forenoon came up at 7¼ o'clock, and reported that the air was very bad, and that most of those who had volunteered to rescue the miners were so much exhausted that restoratives had to be applied. He thought at least four hours would be required to reach the place where the men are supposed to be. Nine men explored the mine as far as they were able to go, but found no traces of either the bodies of the victims or of the cause of the accident. Other volunteers were on hand, and descended the shaft at once, but no more corpses were found until 4:10, when the body of JAMES MORGAN was brought up. His arms were bent, with the hands tightly closed, and his face was horribly distorted. He leaves a wife and three children. At 4¼ DAVID HARRIS was found. He looked as though he died in great pain. He leaves three motherless children. At 4:50 two volunteers, named DAVID R. WILLIAMS and GEORGE BRADLEY, were sent up in an almost dying condition. Restoratives were immediately applied, and every effort was made to resuscitate them, but they were sent home still insensible at about 5 o'clock, though their ultimate recovery is hoped for. The following are the names of all the men in the shaft at the time of the disaster: David Harris, taken out dead; J. Morgan, taken out dead; Thom. Leshong, taken out dead; Evan Jones, taken out dead; David Owens, Thom. Reese, Jas. Jones, Charles Price, Jno Reese, Robert Hughes, Ben Williams, taken out dead; Edward Owens, John Morgan, Richard Owens, M. Quinsley, Martin Morgan and Ben. Davis. The Eagle shaft is

Fire Damp Again - cont.

owned and operated by ALVA THOMPSON, and has always been considered a "fire-hole," to use the expression of a miner with whom we conversed, as it has always been with the greatest difficulty that a sufficiency of pure air could be forced into the shaft. The theories and conjectures as to the cause of the disaster are many, some of the opinion that there was a great fire of coal in the chambers or passages a mile or more from the shaft, which drove the pure air out of the mine, leaving the men to die. The general opinion is, however, that the calamity was caused by the explosion of the fire-damp, the first intimation that anything was wrong being the rattling and jostling of the descending car, as the air rushed out of the shaft with such velocity as for a moment to stop its descent.

MIDNIGHT.—Three volunteers have just been taken out insensible, and no further attempts to recover the bodies will be made before daylight. Five bodies only have been taken out.

Dispatch to the Associated Press.

PITTSBURGH, Penn., Aug. 14.—A fire-damp explosion occurred this morning in the Eagle shaft, operated by ALVA THOMPSON. Twenty men were working in a new gangway at the time of the explosion, which tore away the timbers supporting the roof, causing it to fall, and leaving the men imprisoned behind the rocks, with no means of escape until the debris shall be cleared away. BENJAMIN DAVIS, who was working outside of the gangway, was instantly killed by the explosion. The men imprisoned are most likely dead, or will be before they can be reached.

AFTERNOON.—Of the twenty men working in the mine sixteen were employed on the new gangway, and are imprisoned by the falling roof. Three others, working in other parts of the mine, escaped uninjured. Further particulars will be sent as soon as obtained.