

Preface

The handsome old fellow you see here is my great-great grandfather, Tandy Jones. This particular photo hung in an old, oval frame on the wall of my grandmother's home in Thaxton, Virginia. As a young boy, I always felt those eyes were following me no matter where I went in the room. You might chalk that up to the active imagination of a child, but I will bet that if you take just a moment to stare into those eyes, you just might feel the same. If you were like me, you would at least pause before getting into any mischief while you were in the vicinity of that watchful gaze.



I did not know much about Tandy. In fact, I really knew only one piece of information my grandmother had told me. He was a railroad section master for Norfolk & Western in Thaxton, whatever that meant. Little did I know that Tandy's chosen occupation would lead me to spend the better part of two years researching and writing the book you now hold. It started one summer evening in 2011 while on a beach trip with family. The discussion turned to history, as it often does when I get a chance to steer it that way, and at some point someone mentioned a terrible train wreck at Thaxton. Tandy was in charge of the section of rail where the accident took place, but I had never heard any mention of the wreck in my lifetime.

I grew up in South Carolina, but my father was born and raised in Thaxton, and my mother in Montvale, about seven miles west of there. Montvale and Thaxton are part of Bedford County, and nearly every relative I have has lived in the area at one point or

another. Just about every holiday road trip we took as a family while I was growing up was to Bedford County. My parents eventually left South Carolina and moved back to Thaxton when they retired. Mom and Dad loved the area greatly, and they would typically refer to it as “home,” no matter where they were living.

Over the years, I spent many hours sitting with family on my grandmother’s porch on the mountain, and I thought I had heard just about every story at one point or another. I was amazed that, despite all the stories I had heard, the terrible train wreck at Thaxton had never been a topic. I had no idea that it transpired only a handful of miles from grandma’s house and my parents’ much-beloved home. I wanted to know more about the story.

As I began to dig into the history of the wreck, I was surprised to find that there was significant loss of life, and the details of the accident were unbelievably terrifying and heartbreaking. Yet there seemed to be no particular memorializing of the wreck or of those who lost their lives that night in 1889. The research that I plunged into later revealed to me that this lack of attention was not out of the ordinary. There were many railroad wrecks during those early days of rapid expansion. Improvements in technology were consistently made to make rail travel safer, but the wrecks just seemed to be part of the package. Some wrecks were remembered in famous songs like “The Ballad of Casey Jones” or “The Wreck of the Old 97,” but such memorials were hit or miss. It often seemed that the personality of the engineer or the lore surrounding a wrecked train determined whether it would be remembered. The number of casualties in a wreck did not necessarily have any bearing on how well it was memorialized.

The wreck of passenger train Number Two at Thaxton seemed to slip away completely from the pages of history. Historical markers in Virginia are located at the sites of the “Wreck of the Old 97” in Danville and the “Wreck at the Fat Nancy” in Orange. The markers describe those wrecks as two of the worst in Virginia history, although both paled in comparison to the number of lives lost at Thaxton. As you will read in this book, the events that transpired

after the wreck that night raised the horror of this deadly accident to unimaginable heights.

This book was written to give a fitting memorial not only to those lives that were lost, but also to those who lived on and carried the scars of this tragedy with them in one way or another. It is common for us to focus on the details of the wreck and the train itself, but often we lose sight of the actual people who were part of it. Over four hundred individual sources of information were reviewed to compose their story. Those sources included historical newspapers, books, court documents, personal letters, state and federal records, and personal interviews with descendants of passengers and Thaxton area families. Each of the seventy-four known passengers and crew on the train that night were researched individually in order to provide the most accurate telling possible of a story long forgotten.