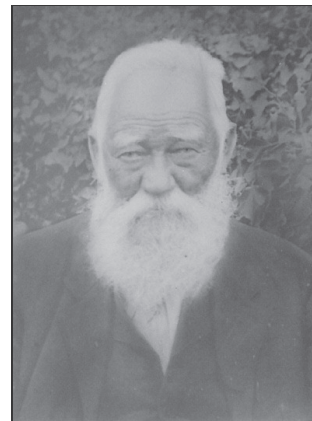


PREFACE

On the wall of her old farmhouse in Thaxton, Virginia, my Grandma Jones had hung an antique oval frame which held a timeworn photo of my great-great grandfather, Tandy Jones. Tandy was in his later years when the photo was taken, his full white beard conspicuous against a coal-colored coat. Whenever I look at old photos from that era and before, I often imagine the interesting stories that must have swirled around that person. But as a young boy, I kept my attention on those steely-blue eyes staring back at me from that antique frame. Tandy's eyes followed me no matter where I went in the room. You might chalk that up to the active imagination of a child, but I'll bet you'd feel the same after staring at those eyes for just a few moments. 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.



Beyond Tandy's relentless watch over Grandma's sitting area, I did not know much about the man in the photo. Grandma Jones had told us that Tandy was a railroad section master for Norfolk & Western in

Thaxton, whatever that meant. Little did I know that my great-great grandfather's chosen occupation would lead me to spend the better part of two years researching and writing a story about a night on the job that he probably never forgot.

My involvement in Tandy's story started one summer evening in 2011 while on a beach trip with family. The discussion turned to history, as it often does if I get a chance to steer it that way, and at some point, someone mentioned a terrible train wreck that had occurred at Thaxton long ago. Even though Tandy oversaw the section of rail where the accident took place, I had never heard any mention of the wreck before.

I grew up in South Carolina, but my dad was born and raised in Thaxton, and my mom in Montvale, about seven miles west of there. Montvale and Thaxton are part of Bedford County, and nearly all my relatives have lived in the area at one point or another. When I was growing up, just about every holiday road trip our family took was to Bedford County. When my parents retired, they left South Carolina and moved back to Thaxton. Mom and Dad loved Bedford County, and they would usually refer to it as "home," no matter where they were living.

Over the years, I had spent many hours sitting on my grandmother's porch on the mountain, listening to family share old-time stories. I thought I had heard them all. When I found out about the horrific train wreck at Thaxton, I was amazed that I hadn't heard about it before. I had no idea that the wreck transpired only a handful of miles from my grandma's house. 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 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. Railroad companies consistently implemented improvements in technology to make rail travel safer, but accidents 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 took place 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. I wanted to honor the people involved in the wreck at Thaxton, and I reviewed over four hundred individual sources of information 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 families who live in the Thaxton area. 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.