

“Horrible Accident in Vermont”
From
Phineas Gage A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science

The most unlucky/lucky moment in the life of Phineas Gage is only a minute or two away. It’s almost four-thirty in the afternoon on September 13, 1848. Phineas is the foreman of a track construction gang that is in the process of blasting a railroad right-of-way through granite bedrock near the small town of Cavendish, Vermont. Phineas is twenty-six years old, unmarried, and five feet, six inches tall, short for our time but about average for his. He is good with his hands and good with his men, “possessing an iron will as well as an iron frame,” according to his doctor. In a moment, Phineas will have a horrible accident.

It will kill him, but it will take another eleven years, six months, and nineteen days to do so. In the short run, Phineas will make a full recovery, or so it will seem to those who didn’t know him before. Old friends and family will know the truth. Phineas will never be his old self again. His “character” will change. The ways in which he deals with others, conducts himself, and makes plans will all change. Long after the accident, his doctor will sum up his case for a medical journal. “Gage,” his doctor will write,

“was no longer Gage.” Phineas Gage’s accident will make him world famous, but fame will do him little good. Yet for many others - psychologist, medical researchers, doctors, and especially those who suffer brain injuries - Phineas Gage will become someone worth knowing.

That’s why we know so much about Phineas. It’s been 150 years since his accident, yet we are still learning more about him. There’s also a lot about Phineas we don’t know and probably never will. The biggest question is the simplest one and the hardest to answer: Was Phineas lucky or unlucky? Once you hear his story, you can decide for yourself. But right now, Phineas is working on the railroad and his time has nearly come.