

# Forensic Files

Quarterly on Mechanical Systems Failures



## The Great Molasses Disaster of 1919

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In the days leading up to the Great Molasses Disaster, the temperature in Boston rose almost 40F. On the January 12th it was only 2F. By the 15th, it was 43F. That day at the Boston freight terminal, four freight cars were already loaded. The fifth was half empty stopped on the track next to the molasses tank.

The last car was about to finish loading when a low rumble shook the freight yard. The sounds of metal heaving and tearing shook the earth as the bottom of the molasses tank split open. A tidal wave of brown molasses spouted into the sky bearing down on the city of Boston. The wave was so intense it knocked over the five freight cars and several dozen buildings in the city. Overall, 21 people died due to the molasses.

United States Industrial Alcohol Company spent \$50,000 on expert witnesses to defend itself against over 125 lawsuits. However, the auditor's report found USIA responsible for the disaster because the molasses tank, which was 58'x 90', was not strong enough to withstand the pressure of the 2,500,000 gallons it was designed to hold.

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*The molasses tank after the collapse*



*Firefighters used ladders to rescue people and bodies.*



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