Students protect train-wreck hero monument

By Ann Baker, Denver Water Communications and Marketing

More than a century after a train engineer saved all 450 passengers before dying in the crash he saw coming, a group of students are preserving the 113-year-old monument erected in his honor.

The granite marker, tucked away on Denver Water property near the confluence of the North Fork of the South Platte River, stands near the old Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad routes. A group of West Jefferson Middle School honor students saw the deteriorating monument – slumping toward the river and starting to separate – as a real-world lesson in history, engineering and fundraising.

On Aug. 28, 1898, train engineer Billy Westall led a group of passengers on a trip from Denver’s Union Station along the South Platte River into the mountains, returning to Denver by dinner. The route was a common daytrip for city dwellers at the time, eager to spend a day out of town and enjoy a picnic in the mountains.

That afternoon, the train made its scheduled stop in the small town of Pine, continuing onto the Dome Rock Station. Westall noticed that a pile of rocks, trees and debris had washed across the tracks, and, sensing the train would crash, slowed the cars enough so the crew and passengers could jump off.
Although everyone on board scrambled to safety, Westall couldn’t escape in time. The train rolled, pinning him underneath.

"Train engineer Billy Westall died in this train wreck after he slowed the train so all 450 passengers and crew members could escape the pending crash. Photo courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Western History Collection"

Several people freed him, but his injuries were too severe. He died later that night, whispering, “tell my wife I died thinking of her,” as he took his last breath.

“The story is so interesting,” said Neil Sperandeo, retired Denver Water recreation manager who coached the students through the restoration process. “And not many people have heard of it.”

A year after the train wreck, the Ancient Order of United Workmen erected a 10-foot granite monument near the site of the crash. Westall’s name and last words are engraved in the stone, which has survived more than a century of forest fires and floods, the end of the railroad line, and the harsh mountain weather. But the soft riverbed has shifted beneath it, causing the structure to lose ground support and tilt toward the river.

“It’s definitely going to fall apart sometime,” said Jessica Barbier, a Denver Water engineer who met with the students to talk about what engineering and construction help would be needed to restore the monument.

The students raised money for the project and researched its history to replace a plaque that once was bolted to the stone. On Dec. 9, 2013, the monument was moved to its new location where it will be more visible from the nearby dirt road. Once it’s completely restored, the students plan to
promote the monument so people stop and learn more about the last heroic act a train engineer made so long ago.
Brandon Ransom, Denver Water recreation manager, oversaw the operation to move the monument.

The monument was moved in seven separate pieces.

A large crane was used to move sections of the monument.