

The Boston Globe

Families of men killed in South End trench are reeling

By [Evan Allen](#) and [Laura Crimaldi](#) Globe Staff October 22, 2016

They had no chance.

Kelvin Mattocks, a big-hearted father of four, and Robert Higgins, a good-natured welder who believed his life was finally looking up, struggled as the water rose around them. But the pipe that burst in the trench they were digging on Dartmouth Street in the South End Friday gushed with such ferocity that the 12-foot dirt walls had begun to cave in.

“I heard them screaming, ‘Help! Help! Help! Help!’” said Steven Smith Jr., a construction worker who happened to be passing during his lunch break. Smith ran to the edge of the trench and saw the water rising above their heads.

“It rose so quick, it was almost like it never happened. Like they were never there,” said Smith on Saturday. “They just disappeared under the water.”

Both Mattocks, 53, and Higgins, 47, who were working for Atlantic Drain Service Co., were killed. The tragedy laid bare the perils faced by construction workers, who walk a delicate line to stay safe on scaffolding and in trenches, their work a seldom noted but essential part of the backdrop of busy city life.

Firefighters spent hours Friday night on their hands and knees, digging the men’s bodies out of the dirt. One of them was recovered in a standing position, according to an official who spoke on condition of anonymity — suggesting that his boots and legs may have been encased almost instantly by the gravel and dirt that cascaded down the sides of the trench.

While it is not yet clear why the water line ruptured, Atlantic Drain has been designated a “severe” violator by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which placed the company in a program for “recalcitrant employers that endanger workers by committing willful, repeat, or failure-to-abate violations,” said Ted Fitzgerald, an agency spokesman.

“I can’t believe this — that this Atlantic Drain Co. was allowed to work in the city anywhere,” said Martin T. Hewitt, Higgins’s uncle. “I’m not going to let this go.”

Higgins had only recently begun working for Atlantic Drain, his family said. It was his first steady job in years, and he was proud to be working and saving money. Mattocks had been



working for Atlantic Drain on and off for 18 years — it was one of three jobs he held down to support the family he adored. He had just adopted three of his young grandchildren.

Robert Higgins (left).

“My heart is broken,” said his sister, Melinda Mattocks-Ushry.

Higgins and Mattocks were working with at least two other people in the deepest part of the trench, which spanned about 20 feet, when the pipe burst Friday around 1 p.m., officials have said. The other workers scrambled to safety, but Higgins and Mattocks got stuck.

“Get out! Get out!” workers began screaming, said Mirtha Colon, 70, who lives nearby.

But in seconds, torrents of brown water were coursing down the street, witnesses said. Smith, who had run to the edge of the trench, watched the water swallow Higgins and Mattocks. He stripped off the construction harness he was wearing and plunged it in, hoping one of the men would grab it. He could see them faintly under the churn. But the harness stayed limp in his hands.

So Smith said he tied an extension cord around his waist, secured it to a nearby stoop, and lowered a ladder into the hole. But the violent current kept pushing him up. He felt around with his feet. Nothing.

Colon said she watched and wept, crying out from her porch, “Cut the water off!” Other workers told Smith that Higgins and Mattocks were pinned by dirt and debris that gave way, he said. Smith could feel the gravel whirring in the water, piling on top of them.

Desperate, Smith began screaming for chains to move the metal plates off the narrower portion of the trench, which he hoped against hope the men might have managed to reach.

But underneath them, there was only more water.

On Saturday, both men’s families said they were shattered.

Higgins had spent the past year talking excitedly about the upswing in his life.

“He was just so proud,” said his aunt, Marilyn Hewitt. “He thought: This was it. He was finally going to be successful.”

A Warren, R.I., native, Higgins had excelled in high school as a football running back, and after graduation, settled into a steady job as a machine operator at a chemical plant. But after about 10 or 12 years, said his uncle, Martin T. Hewitt, the plant downsized and Higgins was let go. For years, he worked odd jobs, his family said. He moved back in with his mother and stepfather a few years ago.

But then he went to school to learn how to weld, and he got hired by Atlantic Drain. He was out the door every morning at 4:30 a.m. and never missed a day.

His stepfather, Jerry Biancuzzo, said Higgins was a kindhearted and responsible person who always made sure their elderly neighbors were safe during storms. Every winter, he was out shoveling walks, Biancuzzo said; he brought people food and made sure they could get out of their homes if they needed to. Higgins, who went by Robbie, loved the Patriots and animals — especially his cat, Rapunzel.

“He was always there for everybody, even when he had nothing,” Biancuzzo said, his voice ragged with grief. “He was just a big-hearted kid. He had his hard knocks. But he told me he was really going to make it now.”

Mattocks went by “Chuck,” and had a reputation for generosity. At one of his other jobs, handling maintenance at Save-A-Lot stores, Roxbury night manager Khaya Cosby said Mattocks would often hire neighborhood homeless people to do things like fix shopping carts — tasks he didn’t actually need any help with — and then pay them out of his own pocket.

“He would do anything for anybody,” Cosby said. “He is that guy.”

Mattocks came from a big family in North Carolina, said his sister, Mattocks-Ushry, but he was her baby — he followed her north to Brockton when she moved and built his house 10 doors down from her own. But he stayed devoted, she said, to his family down South: Just two weeks ago, he traveled home to take his mother to lunch.

“I said, ‘That’s an expensive lunch, brother,’ ” she recalled, laughing. “That’s the type of man he was. He cleaned her yard and put everything up for the winter so she wouldn’t have to do that.”

He loved taking his family on vacations, she said. They went two or three times a year, and his invite list was always expansive — he’d take his grandchildren along and sometimes hers. They went to Disney World, Myrtle Beach, and Six Flags, on spring, winter, and summer vacations, she said.

Mattocks called her on Thursday, a day before he died, she said. He just wanted to tell her he loved her.

“I had no idea he was saying goodbye to me,” she said.



Kelvin Mattocks (center) and his wife and daughters.

Mattocks's daughter's boyfriend, who also works for Atlantic Drain, was on Dartmouth Street Friday when the

accident occurred, Mattocks-Ushry said. The family is devastated, she said.

The Boston Police and Suffolk County District Attorney Daniel F. Conley's office are investigating the men's deaths, which officials have said appear to be accidental. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration is conducting an occupational hazard review. On Saturday, there were no updates on the investigation or review.

Atlantic Drain was doing a private job Friday; it was not working for the city. The company's office in Roslindale was locked Saturday morning.

A woman who answered the phone at a listing for the owner, Kevin Otto, declined to comment. "Can you please leave him alone?" she asked.

On Saturday, Marcy Goldstein-Gelb, the executive director of the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, said she was outraged that Atlantic Drain was still operating with so many violations. The company also owes tens of thousands of dollars in unpaid fines.

"To fail repeatedly and to have had fines, and to have failed to pay the fines, and then to be here in 2016 with two families who have tragically lost loved ones?" she said. "It's just unconscionable."

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Pictured: The construction workers who drowned in a Boston trench after a water pipe line burst and flooded the 15-foot deep hole in seconds

- **Kelvin Mattocks and Robert Higgins died when a trench flooded on Friday**
- **The men became trapped in the 15-foot hole after a water pipe burst**
- **Emergency responders arrived in minutes, but it was already too late**
- **Boston officials are now investigating the flood and company doing work**
- **The company allegedly has a history of violating safety regulations**

By [Khaleda Rahman](#) and [Kalhan Rosenblatt For Dailymail.com](#)

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The two construction workers who drowned in a Boston trench after a pipe line burst have been identified.

Kelvin Mattocks, 53, and Robert Higgins, 47, died after becoming trapped as water filled the approximately 15-foot deep hole on Friday.

Workers frantically called for help, but it took just seconds for the trench on Dartmouth Street to fill with water after the pipe line burst.



Firefighters arrived just moments after the line burst, but it was already too late to save the men.

Robert Higgins (left) and Kelvin Mattocks (right) drowned in a Boston trench after a pipe line burst on Friday



The agony of one man attempting to rescue his fellow construction workers was caught as the muddied water rushed down the road.

Now, Mattocks' and Higgins' family and friends have paid tribute, describing them as generous and kind men.

'He was just a genuinely nice guy,' Greg Stevens said of Mattocks, of Brockton.

'I know it's a cliché that he'd give you the shirt off his back but he would truly do that for you,' he told [CBS Boston](#).

Higgins' aunt Marilyn Hewitt said: 'He was just a kind person. He was an average, gentle kind person, always there to help you out.'

It wasn't until late into Friday night that emergency personnel, working on their hands and knees, were able to remove the bodies from the trench.



© Mark Gartinkel /The Boston Herald via AP



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Two construction workers were killed after a water pipe line burst on Dartmouth Street (pictured) in Boston, flooding a trench in a matter of seconds

Workers frantically called for help, saying two men were down in the trench and had become trapped as water filled the approximately 15-foot deep hole

As they did so local and federal authorities launched an investigation to determine why the line didn't hold.

Samantha Betti, who was in a nearby home when the pipe flooded the South End street, told the [Boston Globe](#): 'It went from nothing to a flood.'

In the moments it took for first responders to arrive, the entire street was under brown, murky water.

Two additional men who had been working down in the trench at the time of the explosion were able to escape.

Boston Police Commissioner William B. Evans told the Globe the pipe bursting was an accident.

Video courtesy [WBZ](#)

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It wasn't until late into Friday night that emergency personnel, working on their hands and knees, were able to remove the bodies from the trench



© Mark Garfinkel /The Boston Herald via AP

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Boston Police Commissioner William B. Evans told the Globe the pipe bursting was an accident

'It looks like somehow a pipe must have broke, and unfortunately they weren't able to get themselves out of the hole,' Evans told the paper.

But an investigation

has been launched to determine whether Atlantic Drain Service Co., the company working on the private construction project at the time, took the necessary safety precautions.

A resident had called the company to conduct underground work.

The company has a history of 'serious safety violations', according to the Globe.



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Atlantic Drain Service Co. was the company working on the private construction project

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Local and federal authorities have launched an investigation to determine why the line

didn't hold, but it is believed there was no foul play

In 2007, it was first reported that Atlantic Drain employees were working a job with no cave-in protection – and the company has been cited numerous times for safety violations.

These included a serious violation where workers were in possible danger of a head injury and another violation that they weren't protected from cave-ins in 2012.

And safety experts are questioning how a company with so many violations and outstanding fines was able to obtain a permit for a job.

'There's enough of a history that this should not have happened,' Marcy Golstein-Gelb, the executive director of the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, told CBS Boston.



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Two additional men who had been working down in the trench at the time of the burst were able to escape

Read more:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3864454/Pictured-construction-workers-drowned-Boston-trench-water-pipe-line-burst-flooded-15-foot-deep-hole-seconds.html#ixzz4O1C5xd88>

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Families ID Workers Killed In South End Trench Flooding

BOSTON (CBS) — Outside her door Mirtha Colon sees the aftermath of the scene she won't soon forget: the desperate [attempt to rescue two workers from a 12 foot-trench flooding with water](#) from a ruptured pipe on Dartmouth Street.

“The water bubbling up, bubbling up, it was absolutely horrible,” Colon said.

The victims have been identified by family as 47-year-old Robert Higgins and 53-year-old Kelvin Mattocks.



Kelvin Mattocks (via Facebook).

“He was just a genuinely nice guy. I know it’s a cliché that he’d give you the shirt off his back but he would truly do that for you,” Greg Stevens, who owns a store around the corner from the Roslindale office of Atlantic Drain, said of Mattocks.

Robert Higgins. (WBZ)

“He was just a kind person. He was an average, gentle kind person, always there to help you out,” Higgins’ aunt Marilyn Hewitt said of her nephew.

The company was on a private job installing a sewer pipe, but now safety experts want to take a closer look at whether precautions were in place on the job.

“There’s enough of a history that this should not have happened,” said Marcy Goldstein-Gelb, executive director of the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health.

Atlantic Drain Service employed the two workers killed when a trench flooded in the South End. (WBZ)

It was back in 2007 that MassCosh first reported that Atlantic Drain employees were on a job with no cave-in protection. Since then OSHA has cited the company numerous times, including a “willful” violation that workers were “not protected from cave-ins” back in 2012. A “serious” violation that they were in “possible danger of head injury” without being required to wear protective helmets. And a “repeat” violation that required rescue team were not on job sites.

Questions are being raised about how a company with numerous safety violations and tens of thousands of dollars in outstanding fines can continue to get permits for jobs.

“There’s a huge gaping hole in state law and the permitting process that allows an employer to claim they are familiar with trenching procedures, but have a history of violating them and are still able to obtain a permit,” said Goldstein-Gelb.

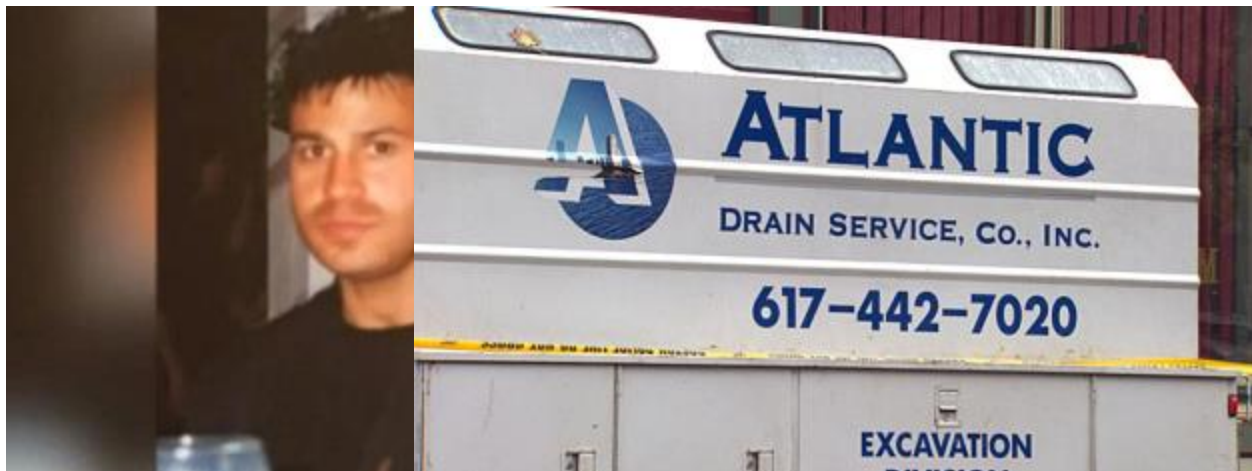
It’s not clear why the water line ruptured in the first place, only questions about what led to the sudden deaths of two workers on the job.

“His death was tragic, and from what we’ve heard, it should not have happened,” Hewitt said.

Beth Germano

Follow Beth on Twitter Emmy award-winning Beth Germano is a general assignment reporter for WBZ-TV News. Born and raised in Massachusetts, Germano has been a New England-based reporter for more than 15 years. She joined WBZ-TV as a freelanc...

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Company in fatal Boston water main break faced violations

Sunday

Posted Oct 23, 2016 at 7:36 AM Updated Oct 23, 2016 at 7:36 AM

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By The Associated Press

BOSTON — A company involved in a water main break in Boston that killed two workers has a history of safety violations, federal records show.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration records show that Atlantic Drain Services, of Boston, has received citations for workers lacking oxygen underground and for conditions that could lead to cave-ins.

Records show the company faces tens of thousands of dollars of unpaid fines for violations reaching back to at least 2012.

Two workers were trapped Friday when a water main gave way and flooded a deep trench where they were working in the South End neighborhood. They were identified by family members as Robert Higgins, 47, and Kelvin Mattocks, 53, [The Boston Globe](#) reported.

A call placed to Atlantic Drain Services was not immediately returned Saturday.

Authorities with the Boston Fire Department recovered the bodies Friday night after several hours of painstaking work. In Twitter messages, the department said its technical rescue crew had to work in a trench box. The firefighters were on their knees gently removing dirt with their hands to reach the dead workers.

"Very difficult operation on Dartmouth St. 1st responders trying to respect the deceased while continuing the recovery," read one tweet.

Boston Mayor Marty Walsh expressed his condolences Friday night, adding "Today is a difficult day for the entire City of Boston, and especially those who go to work at construction sites every day to make our city better."

Boston Police Commissioner William B. Evans told the Globe that it appears a pipe must have broken "and unfortunately they weren't able to get themselves out of a hole." He said it appeared other workers were able to escape from the trench.

The trench was estimated to be about 12- to 15-feet deep.

Marcy Goldstein-Gleb, the executive director of MassCOSH, told the Boston Globe the company was conducting private work, not work on behalf of the city of Boston, during the pipe break.

[Additional mentions can be found by clicking here](#)