

Carolina Conductor



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Preserving the Past Active in the Present Planning for the Future

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Spartanburg Amtrak Station

298 Magnolia Street

Spartanburg, SC 29301-2330

Wednesday 10-2 & Saturday 10-2

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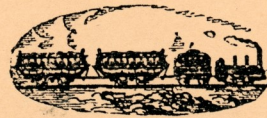
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Articles can be submitted anytime.

Atlantic Coast Line

The Story of the Atlantic Coast Line



1830...1930

And

1990



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Museum Happenings



↑ Large wrench used to remove an air hose on railroad cars.



↖ Even locomotives are not immune from graffiti.



↑ Old time brake club used to hand tighten a cars brakes. These photos show some of the new displays in the museum.



↑ Hand powered car mover used to manually spot a car.

Wanted—Articles for the Carolina Conductor

Submit an article of 200 words or more with some photos and captions and see them in print. Every one of us has some unique railroad experience that would make interesting reading for our membership. Your editor always needs more contributions of railway history and news.

The Story of the Atlantic Coast Line

On February 10, 1830, a little company of progressive people of Petersburg, Virginia, obtained from the General Assembly of Virginia a charter for the construction of a railroad from Petersburg "to some convenient point on the North Carolina line." When completed in 1833 the new railroad reached from Petersburg to a point one and one-half miles below the falls of the Roanoke River near Weldon, North Carolina, a distance of 59 miles.

Constructed as a community enterprise to attract trade to Petersburg, the Petersburg Railroad was the earliest of more than 100 short, disconnected, railroads that were later brought together into the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad to form a single unified system between the North and the South, with a network of lines serving the six Southeastern states, which brought into actual being that "Great Highway of the Union" envisaged by the founders of the Petersburg Railroad.



The pioneer tradition persists. In recent years new railroads that have stirred the imagination and called to mind the exploits and hardships of the early railroad builders have

been constructed into sections as yet undeveloped. But there is other, less spectacular, work that is of even greater importance. Present day transportation demands double track, automatic block signals and train-control, heavy rail, substantial ballast, perma-

nent structures, adequate terminal facilities, ample modern equipment, and men who are transportation experts; and the Atlantic Coast Line has been a pioneer in providing them.

To this progressiveness, that has been a distinguishing characteristic of the Atlantic Coast Line, there has been added the doctrine of sound and conservative business practice and well considered judgment. The result is



Throughout their history the roads comprising the Atlantic Coast Line have been pioneers, pushing new lines of rails from established settlements, cities, and ports, back into the undeveloped wilderness; making possible the utilization of natural resources, the development of profitable agriculture, and the establishment of new industries.

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to be found in a railroad system that furnishes transportation of the highest type to an empire that is still in the making.

The construction of the Petersburg Railroad, and of many of the other railroads that later became a part of the Atlantic Coast Line, had its beginning in the struggle for trade supremacy and advantage between cities and sections along the South Atlantic Coast that dates back to colonial times.

One hundred years ago the sections along the coast were already old. The seaport cities had been built upon the trade of the rich agricultural lands along the coast and inland waterways that had first been put into cultivation. But the fertility of these lands was being depleted. Furthermore, the Piedmont sections to the West and, across the mountains, the rich valleys of the rivers flowing to the Gulf,

were attracting an ever growing number of settlers. It was vital to the life of the coastal cities that they should secure the trade of these new sections.

Transportation was the controlling factor of the situation. Those planters along the coast and rivers could float their products to market, a slow and costly process, but the only one available. Those in the interior were compelled to haul their crops to the nearest navigable water, a process so expensive as to preclude any but the most valuable commodities. Lack of cheap overland transportation prevented the development of the Piedmont districts; the fact that navigable rivers did not always bring down to the coastal cities the produce from the sections which each city considered its rightful trade territory made the merchants eager for some means that would enable them to overcome the handicaps of water transportation and to attract the trade of the rich new inland settlements.

At or near the head of navigation of most of the principal streams important trading centers had grown up. To these points the produce of the Piedmont and mountain districts was brought on pack horses or by wagon to be loaded on boats or rafts and taken to the ports for shipment abroad or to the markets of the North and East. A number of the early railroads were constructed with the view of intercepting the trade of then back country at the head of river navigation so as to divert it to the cities or sections that furnished the capital with which the various railroads were built. Richmond, Petersburg, and Norfolk competed for the trade of parts of Virginia and, to a certain extent, of North Carolina, lying west of the Coastal



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Plain; Norfolk and Wilmington were in competition for the trade of certain districts of North Carolina.

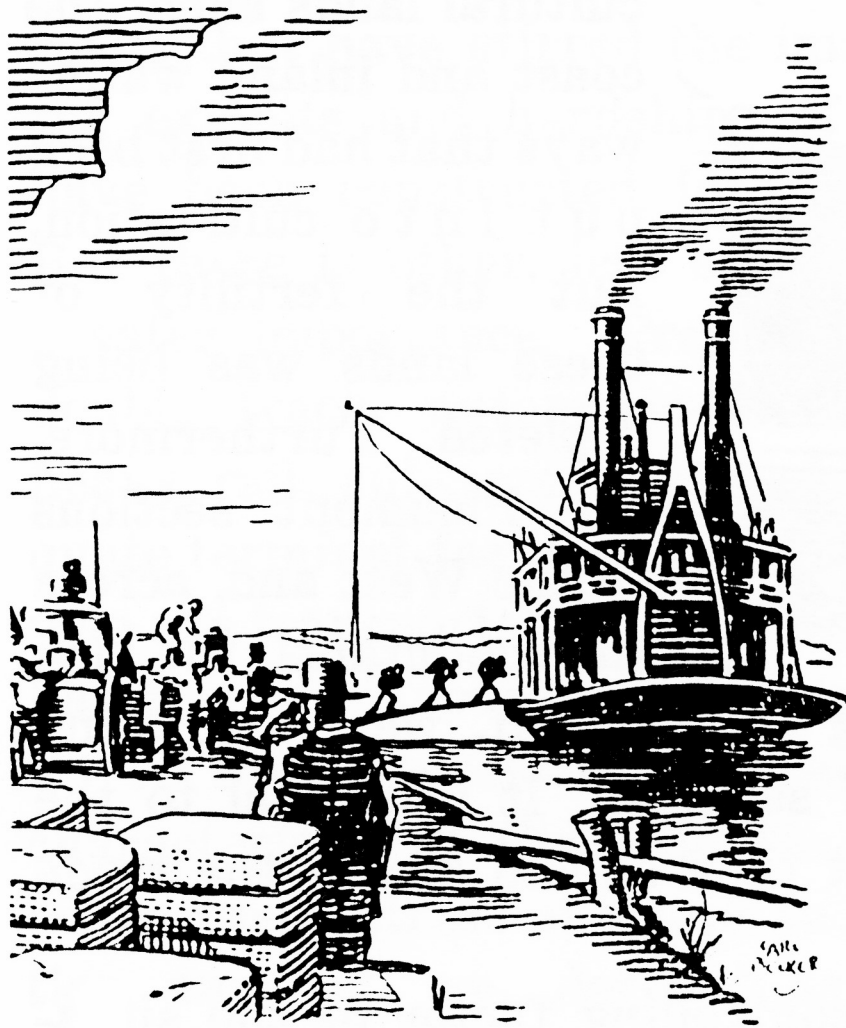
Charleston and Wilmington both wanted the produce of the upper Pee Dee River sections Savannah and Charleston vied with each other in their effort to secure the business of the Savannah River Valley.

The construction of the Dismal Swamp Canal which made it possible for the produce of certain sections of North Carolina tributary to the Roanoke, Neuse, and Tar Rivers to be brought by boat to Norfolk, gave Norfolk an advantage over Richmond, Petersburg, and Wilmington. Competition for the trade moving by the canal was later partly responsible for the construction of two of the early railroads that are now part of the Atlantic Coast Line system.

Another determining factor in the building of these and other early roads was the increasing volume of through passenger traffic between the North and the South which promised substantial revenues.

Early Railroads Were Community Enterprises

Like the Petersburg Railroad, many of



the early railroads that later became a part of the Atlantic Coast Line were strictly community or sectional enterprises.

They were built by local capital, augmented in some cases by state funds, and were officered and manned by local people. From the outset they were essential parts of the economic life of their respective communities. Every person along

their rails had a direct personal interest in them. Conceived as a relief for conditions that were rapidly becoming intolerable, they gave new impetus to agriculture, industry and trade and became increasingly important as time went on.

The Petersburg Railroad was completed in the fall of 1833, and almost at once justified the optimistic predictions of its founders. Business was good from the outset and the traffic steadily increased.

The success of the Petersburg Railroad demonstrated the advantages of railroads over other transportation and resulted in a movement to connect Petersburg and Richmond by rail. On March 14, 1836, the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad was

chartered to build a line between the two points named. Construction began in the spring of the same year, and in May 1838, the line was in operation.

On January 3, 1834, the people of Wilmington, North Carolina, secured a charter for the construction of the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad. The idea at first was to join Wilmington and Raleigh, N. C., but the people of Raleigh would not subscribe to the capital stock so the railroad was built to Weldon, N. C., near the head of navigation on the Roanoke River, and only a short distance from the terminus of the Petersburg Railroad. In 1855 the name of the Company was changed to the Wilmington and Weldon.

Money

was scarce and many difficulties had to be overcome, but the railroad was finally completed and put in operation on March 19, 1840. Covering a distance of 161 miles, it was at that time the longest railroad in the world.

The construction of these three lines, while undertaken separately and for the principal purpose of attracting trade to the three larger cities served, formed, in connection with the line of the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac north of Richmond, an important north and south route, and made it possible to travel by rail from Accomac Creek in Virginia to Wilmington, N. C., although change of cars was necessary at all terminal points, as there was no track connection between the three railroads. During the War between the States, such connection between the Petersburg and the Richmond and Petersburg was made as a war measure, but it was not until 1866-67 that the charters of the roads were amended to permit a permanent connection of the rails of the two lines.

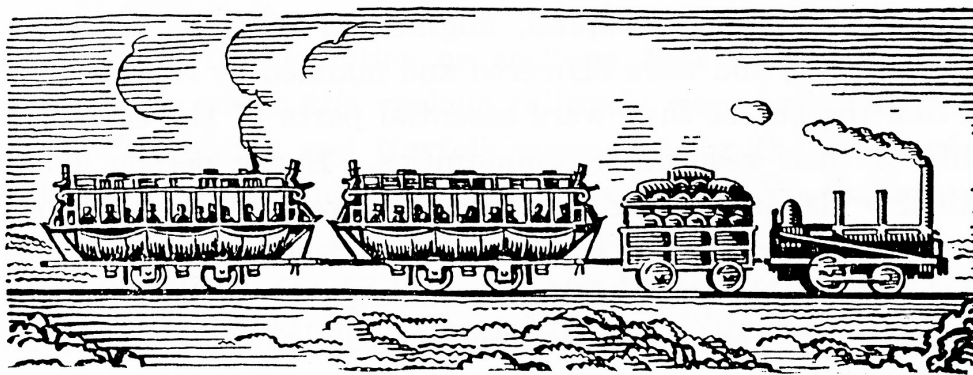
From Wilmington, steamers operated by

the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad, ran to Charleston, S. C. This rail-water line proved to be popular because it furnished the most direct route between the South and the East, and greatly shortened the time required for the trip.

The largest revenue of the three roads in the early days was, generally speaking, derived from local passenger traffic, although through passenger traffic formed an increasingly important item and before 1860 far exceeded local traffic.

The cheap and light construction of the early roads was

not suited for the handling of heavy freight traffic and maintenance charges required the expenditure of unex-



pectedly large amounts of current income. As a result, the stockholders received scant dividends and there was considerable dissatisfaction. Heavier rail and equipment were gradually acquired as funds became available, however, and the roads were thus able to handle the growing traffic.

The history of the roads in North Carolina and Virginia is closely paralleled by that of the roads constructed about the same time in South Carolina and Georgia. Trade competition between Wilmington, N. C., Charleston, S. C., and Savannah, Ga., was responsible for the construction of the Wilmington and Manchester, later known as the Wilmington, Columbia and Augusta; the Northeastern of South Carolina; the Cheraw and Darlington; the Atlantic and Gulf, and other lines that were pushed out into fertile back country.

The Beginning of a Modern Railroad System

The War between the States, while it stim-

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ulated traffic and brought, at first, large earnings for some of the railroads, proved disastrous for all. The Richmond and Petersburg, the Petersburg, and the Wilmington and Weldon,

connecting Richmond with a section that furnished large quantities of supplies for Lee's armies, were, in effect, the "Bread Line of the Confederacy." Their importance was further magnified by the fact that Wilmington was the principal, and for a long time the only open port that could be used by blockade runners bringing essential supplies for the forces of the Confederacy. Fort Fisher, commanding the mouth of the Cape Fear River below

Wilmington, was of utmost importance to the Confederate plan of strategy, and the railroads connecting Wilmington and Richmond enabled the quick transport of troops and supplies.

During the latter part of the war, considerable sections of the three railroads were torn up and dismantled by the opposing forces. Much of the equipment was destroyed, bridges and buildings were burned, and many early and important records were lost.

The railroads in Georgia and parts of South Carolina suffered even greater damage and some of them came out of the war

with "nothing but their rights of way." There was inevitably a period of financial reorganization in which the beginning of the Atlantic Coast Line system took form.



In 1869, a group of far-sighted Baltimore capitalists acquired an interest in the Wilmington and Weldon, spent large sums in its rehabilitation, and were successful in restoring its earning capacity. Later, controlling interests were secured in connecting roads to the north and south including the Petersburg, the Richmond and Petersburg, the Wilmington, Columbia, and Augusta, the Northeastern Railroad of South Carolina and the Cheraw and Darlington. This resulted in establishing a unified policy of manage-

ment for the affiliated roads, although they retained their corporate identity.

How the System Got Its Name

For many years prior to this time the route comprised by these railroads had been known as the "Weldon Route." About 1871 the term "Atlantic Coast Line" was adopted because the roads so closely paralleled the Atlantic Ocean. This was at first merely a designation of a route. The companies forming the route, however, used the term on their loco-

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motives, in addition to their own names.

Until 1886, the lines south of Wilmington had tracks five feet wide, while those to the north were standard gauge. When through sleeping cars to and from Florida were inaugurated it was necessary to change trucks under the cars at Wilmington. All freight had to be transferred at that point. On an appointed day in 1886, the tracks of the lines south of Wilmington were changed to standard gauge, without accident or interference with business. This removed the last obstacle to through rail transportation between the Southeast and other parts of the country.

At that time much of the freight to New York and other Eastern points moved by the Wilmington and Weldon to Weldon, thence to Norfolk, and to destination by steamer. Recognizing the advantages that the section along the Carolina Coast offered for the production of early vegetables the management undertook to provide a route that would make it possible to market these perishable products in the large Eastern cities. As a result, the lines making up the all-rail route between Charleston, Wilmington, and New York established in 1887 fast rail service known as the "Atlantic Coast Despatch" between South Atlantic points and New York. Special cars were built for this service, and the insignia, consisting of a large circle enclosing the words "Atlantic Coast Despatch" has become familiar to

hundreds of thousands of people through its continued appearance on cars of the Atlantic Coast Line.

The route of the "Atlantic Coast Line" at that time was from Richmond to Wilmington, thence to Florence and Charleston, S. C. In 1885, however, the Wilmington and Weldon undertook the construction of what was called the "Fayetteville Cut-off," from Contentnea, NC, to Fayetteville, NC, and thence, later, to Pee Dee, SC, on the Wilmington, Columbia, and Augusta. This new line materially shortened the distance and running time and became the main line of the Atlantic Coast Line.

Part 2 will continue next month.



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