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The Memphis and Charleston: The Railroad Comes to Huntsville

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THE MEMPHIS & CHARLESTON

Muscle Shoals proved to be a strong impetus to the development of railroading across North Alabama in the mid-19th century. Located in that stretch of the Tennessee River between Decatur and Tuscumbia, the Shoals often were unnavigable for prolonged periods of the year, which made it difficult, if not impossible, to get locally grown cotton to market in New Orleans when the best prices could be obtained for the crop. In the early 19th century, all freight had to be transported along the natural waterways; where obstacles existed, such as the Shoals, local interests explored alternative means to by-pass them. This led first to the digging of canals and then to the construction of crude railroads.

The first railway in Alabama was the Tuscumbia Railway Company chartered by the state legislature in 1830. It ran a distance of two miles--from Tuscumbia to the Tennessee River--and consisted of iron straps laid on wooden stringers with the motive power provided by horses. Two years later the second state railroad was chartered, the Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad Company (TC&D), which had essentially the same board of directors as the Tuscumbia Railway. This company was organized to build a railway that would extend from Tuscumbia to Decatur thereby providing transportation around the Shoals, a distance of forty-four miles.

The Tuscumbia, Courtland &

The Railroad Comes to Huntsville

by Linda Bayer

The earliest American railroads were short lines designed to serve as connecting links between water courses and were initiated and financed by local markets to serve their own purposes. There was little attempt at first to make railroads an alternative system of transportation independent of the waterways.

Decatur Railroad was completed to Decatur in 1834 and used horses to pull the cars until their first steam engine arrived that year. The panic of 1837 forced this company into bankruptcy, and it was not until 1848 that the company was sold to a new owner who merged it with the Tuscumbia Railway Company to form the Tennessee Val-

RAILROAD IN ALABAMA

1850-1898

Huntsville Passenger Depot



ley Railroad Company (TVRR). At the time of the sale, the property of the TC&D consisted of the following:

Tuscumbia--Four acres containing a large depot and inclined plane connecting the depot with the Tennessee River, a stone wharf extending to low water mark, and a large frame building for storage. Also, another parcel of land contain-

ing a railroad warehouse, shop, offices and a foundry.

Leighton--A depot, stables, and a frame building.

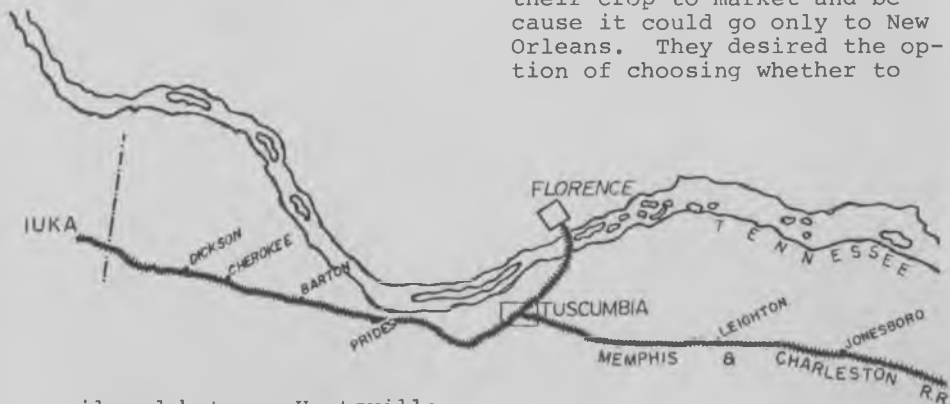
Courtland--A depot and stables.

Decatur--A large brick and stone depot on the Tennessee River, offices and shops at the head of the inclined plane, and a brick boarding house for the

railroad company.

Equipment--Ninety-one freight cars, two passenger cars, and five locomotives.

In the same year the TC&D was completed, a proposal was published in the *Southern Advocate*, a Huntsville newspaper, urging the construction of



a railroad between Huntsville and the Tennessee River at Whitesburg. The anonymous writer estimated that a railway would be cheaper than a turnpike, costing only \$40,000 for the road plus another \$10,000 for warehouses, cars, horses, and gears. He felt that it would attract additional freight shipments through Huntsville which would then connect with the TC&D at Decatur. The newspaper editorialized that "A railroad may, as yet, be regarded as a novelty among us, and the mind is always more or less startled by new enterprises. A thorough and comprehensive examination of a subject, however, soon divests it of all its difficulty, and reconciles us to schemes which at first appear visionary and impractical." Nevertheless, it was almost 60 years before a railroad was constructed along this route.

While the Tennessee Valley

Railroad was operating, it permitted cotton to be transported past the Shoals, but there still remained the long, arduous trip down the Tennessee, the Ohio, and the Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans. The North Alabama planters were at a disadvantage because of the time involved in delivering their crop to market and because it could go only to New Orleans. They desired the option of choosing whether to

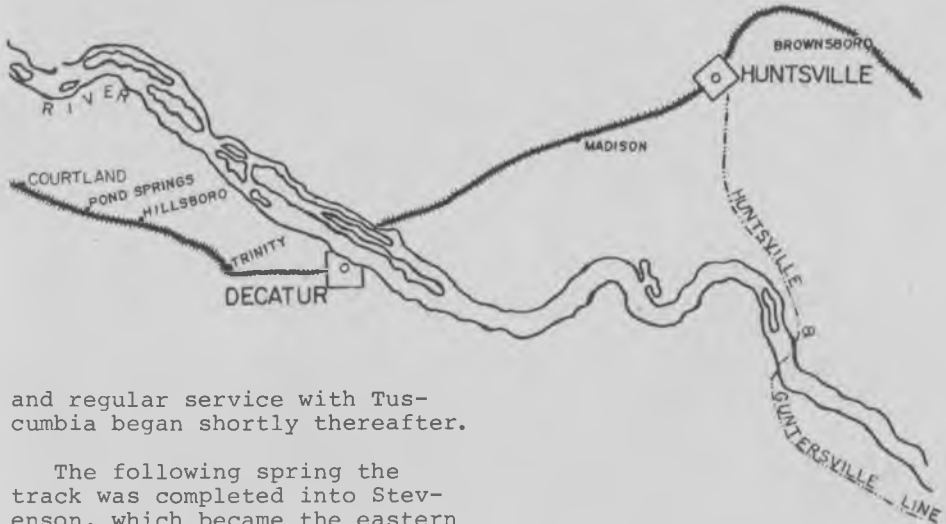
send their cotton to a Gulf coast or an east coast seaport for sale. Consequently, it was the planters who initiated the drive to locate an east-west railroad that would connect Memphis on the Mississippi River with Charleston on the Atlantic Ocean.

The Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company (M&C) was chartered through Alabama in 1850, and the Alabama commissioners then acquired the property of the TVRR along whose route the M&C tracks were laid. For \$75,000, paid in stock, the M&C received not only the tracks and land of the TVRR but also the warehouses, depots, shops, and tools.

Construction of the M&C began in Madison County in the summer of 1851 when the engineers arrived to survey the

route. The track was completed in sections so that by 1855 one could travel by train from Memphis to Pocahontas, then take a stage line into Tuscumbia, transfer back to the train for the trip from Tuscumbia to Huntsville, and continue to Stevenson, again by stage, to connect with the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad. The section of road between Decatur and Huntsville had been completed in October of 1855; the train whistle could be heard daily as the track layers approached within two miles of the Huntsville depot. Finally on October 13 the first engine "General Garth" entered town,

locomotive was run several hundred yards in advance of the train to signal should any obstacle be discovered on the tracks. The depots along the way were observed to be "tastefully and commodiously constructed, and pleasantly located." A reporter further noted, "Stevenson is THE town of Jackson County. It is only four or five years old, and already it contains a number of very pretty private residences, three hotels, and several large wholesale and retail houses, which are doing a thriving business." As for the railroad itself, the



and regular service with Tuscumbia began shortly thereafter.

The following spring the track was completed into Stevenson, which became the eastern terminus of the M&C when the directors elected to lease for thirty years the tracks of the Nashville and Chattanooga between that point and Chattanooga. To celebrate the completion of the eastern section of the road, the M&C provided a complimentary ride to Stevenson and return for the stockholders. The 300 passengers made the sixty mile trip in four hours. In order to prevent an accident, a separate

writer could not be too flattering: "The road, which was infinitely smoother than we had anticipated, in view of the great haste with which the work was done--the cars--the depots--the bridges, which are really superb--the cordial receptions on the way--the company--the dinner--in short, with one or two exceptions not worthy of notice, every thing connected with the trip pleased us vastly."

The following year, 1856, the M&C opened their Railroad Hotel on the present site of Dilworth Lumber Company, across the tracks from the depot. It was under the operation of James M. Venable and became known as Venable's Hotel. During the Civil War it closed but was reopened in 1866 as the Donegan Hotel after being thoroughly refitted and newly finished. In 1873 the railroad offered for sale all of its real estate along the tracks including "that valuable property in Huntsville known as the Donegan Hotel, together with many lots lying near the depot."

For operational ease, the M&C was divided into the Eastern and Western Divisions, with Huntsville being the headquarters of the Eastern Division. This meant that Huntsville received a more substantial depot than other towns of similar size because it contained the offices for the Eastern Division administration. In addition,

the shops were located in Huntsville which gave the town its first real industry. These shops consisted of a large roundhouse with turntable, engine house, car shop, and machine shop. The railroad employed machinists in the shops to carry out the necessary repairs and rebuilding of the rolling stock. The company also built homes for many of these employees near the depot.

By 1857 the M&C tracks were complete from Memphis to Stevenson, a distance of 272 miles. The M&C operated successfully until the Civil War interrupted. In a surprise move, Federal troops commanded by General O. M. Mitchel occupied Huntsville at dawn on April 11, 1862, and took possession of the telegraph office located at the depot as well as the railroad it-



self. Mitchel reported that "We have captured about 200 prisoners, 15 locomotives, a large amount of passenger, box and platform cars, the telegraphic apparatus and offices, and two southern mails. We have at length succeeded in cutting the great artery of railway intercommunication between the Southern States." With the exception of a few months, Federal troops occupied Huntsville for the remainder of the war.

Control of the M&C was critical during the war for it formed a vital link in the only completed east-west rail route across the southern states. Union detachments controlled about 100 miles of the M&C, thereby severing the Confederacy. When the railroad was finally bought back from the U. S. Government by the owners, it was a shambles. Both armies had fought over it for three years, and by the end of the war, most of the road west of Decatur had been completely destroyed. Bridges were gone, rolling stock scattered or destroyed, crossties rotted, and the iron rails had been heated and wrapped around trees to prevent their reuse.

The 1866 M&C annual report stated that the loss in Confederate securities sustained by the road during the war came to over one million dollars, in addition to the loss of track, equipment, and buildings. However it went on to say that the road then owned 52 locomotives, 41 passenger and baggage cars, and 349 freight cars. Although the road had borrowed heavily to make repairs and replace equipment, the president was confident that the M&C would soon be paying dividends again regularly. Unfortunately it was never able to overcome the

financial setback created by the war, and in 1877, the railroad was leased to the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia Railroad Company (ETV&G) for twenty years. The ETV&G was absorbed by Southern Railway Company in 1894, and four years later Southern purchased the M&C outright on February 25, 1898.

The technology of railroad-ing made tremendous advances during the period that the M&C was operational. During the 1850s, the railroads gradually began the change from wood to coal to power their steam locomotives, and the use of the telegraph to schedule trains became widespread. The North Alabama Telegraph Company--the second such company in Alabama--was chartered in 1852 and was located at the M&C facility in Huntsville.

But the major changes occurred in the decades following the Civil War. Companies were expanded and consolidated, lines were connected, locomotives and rolling stock became highly specialized, tracks were improved, steel rails replaced iron ones, and automatic air brakes were introduced. The resulting size and efficiency of the railway system in this country made imperative the regulation of local time. Train schedules had become hopelessly confused with each community setting its own time based on the sun. Consequently the railroad officials met at a General Time Convention in 1883 and adopted the system of Standard Time, which went into effect at noon on November 18, 1883.

Another problem that had to be solved by the railroads was the standardization of track gauge. During the antebellum

period, each company adopted its own gauge. The result was that the cars and locomotives from one line were incompatible with those of the next, necessitating the transfer of passengers, freight, and luggage between lines or the readjustment of the wheels on each car. In 1886 the railroads agreed to adopt a standard track gauge of 4'9", and during May and June, all tracks, cars, and locomotives were converted to this gauge. The M&C, which had been built to a 5' gauge, completed the conversion of its line from Memphis to Stevenson in a single day, May 31, 1886. No trains ran that day, and thousands of men, working in twenty mile sections, changed all the rails and adjusted the trucks on the rolling stock to the new standard gauge.

Although the railroads most pressing concerns throughout the 19th century were the operation of the trains and the development of new technologies, they were also forced to create a new building type--the depot --for which there existed no historical precedent. The earliest depots were designed for the purely functional considerations of selling tickets and providing shelter from the elements. However, by the end of the 19th century, they had evolved into something quite different: they had become the gateway to and the symbol of the city.

Earlier forms of transportation, the canals and turnpikes, usually had provided no special buildings for passengers but instead used convenient inns or taverns as their collection points. When railroading began, the companies were forced by economics to invest all their funds in track, bridges and equipment in order

to start operations as quickly as possible. There was no money to spare for depots, and railroads continued the earlier practice of operating out of public houses. However, the necessity for depots quickly became apparent, and they were soon erected in every town the railroad entered. The earliest and those in small towns tended to resemble cottages, perhaps in an effort to reassure a sceptical public that railroad travel was safe by providing it with a domestic image. Furthermore, unlike Europe, the United States at the start of railroading was composed of numerous small cities spread at great distances from each other so there was no need for large scale stations; but as the 19th century progressed, cities grew, the railroads became large and successful, and depots became the focal point for the whole community. Gradually railroads replaced water and turnpike travel; consequently, it was through the depot that goods, people, and news arrived and departed. In short, the depot became the most important building in the community. After the Civil War, railroad technology was concentrated on luxury, safety and speed. The depots grew into impressive, opulent structures and became "to the 19th century what monasteries and cathedrals were to the 13th century. They are truly the only real representative building we possess...Our metropolitan termini have been leaders of the art spirit of our time." (*Building News, 1875*) The railway terminal became the symbol of the age; it represented the progress of modern technology and civilization. It was this symbolic role of the station that led to the building of ever larger and more impressive structures. By the turn of the century, Grand

Central station in New York City had a concourse that was 125' wide, 375' long and 120' high. Obviously these gigantic dimensions were not based on functional considerations but rather were an "attempt to contribute splendid, monumental structures to the urban scene... public buildings should be supremely impressive." (*The Railroad Station, 1956*) The residents of each city identified with their local stations, and each station was viewed by travelers as the image of its city.

Architecturally the stations were representative of the numerous revival styles which achieved popularity in 19th century America, and often they influenced architectural taste through their prominence. To the designer, either the railroad engineer or a professional architect commissioned by the company, stations were a challenge since they were a totally new type of building. There existed no historical precedents to consult for either plan or style so that numerous experiments were tried in both areas. Those architectural styles that were considered most suitable for depots were Italianate, Gothic, Romanesque, and Classical Baroque. The first three could incorporate towers of various design which provided an immediately identifiable image and also housed the railroad clock, which in early days often served as the official time for the town.

After 1900 the railroads began to experience steady competition from the automobile which was more convenient, the bus which was cheaper, and the airplane which was quicker. In order to meet this competition, the railroads found it necessary to cut expenses, the most obvious being the massive, or-

nate terminals. Economy often forced several railroads to consolidate their operations in a single building in each city, which produced the union station serving the trains and customers of more than one road.

Siting was another factor that contributed to the prominence of the terminal. In the pre-automobile era, it was slow and tedious to move goods and people to and from the station so that a centralized location within the business district and convenient to the most people was essential. Conversely, a business site near the depot was the most desirable causing the city to grow up around the station.

In 19th century America, the train's arrival at the local depot was the primary means of contact with the outside world through its delivery of merchandise, mail, newspapers, food, money, and people.

During the years of its operation, the M&C erected numerous stations along its line. The first building phase was completed just in time for the Civil War. Because of the road's strategic importance during that conflict, many of these depots were destroyed and had to be rebuilt in the late 1860s. The M&C ran through a sparsely populated, rural area so that the depots were, for the most part, modest frame structures. The railroad was principally a freight line built to haul cotton, although after the Civil War the tonnage of both lumber and stone exceeded that of cotton; because of this, the M&C stations were predominantly freight depots incorporating a ticket office. Also common during the days of steam were stops without depots where the train took on fuel

and water. These water stops, established by the railroad, often grew into small communities, which were referred to as tank towns. The frequent stops were observed by an English traveler who commented, "Upon second-class lines, especially in the Southern states, the popular criticism upon a slow train, that 'it stops at every wood pile,' has in it not

much of exaggeration."

Although most of these depots are no longer extant, existing photographs indicate that they were built to one of several standard designs. The following article traces the construction history of the M&C depots across northern Alabama as recorded in the company's annual reports.

M&C Stations and Stops

by Catherine K. Gilliam

The Memphis & Charleston Railroad Company annual reports through 1898 were made available to Hugh Dudley of the Huntsville Depot Board through the courtesy of Southern Railway System, Washington, D. C. The following station report was abstracted for publication from these reports by Catherine K. Gilliam. The reports after 1880 all contain the statement that "The M&C Railroad Company does not keep any account of construction and betterments--all expenditures made for additions to and improvement of the company's property are charged to operating expenses," which accounts for the lack of detailed information on the later years of operation.

MARGERUM (MARJORAMS)

First mention of this place as a water stop was in the 1871 report, when a new water tank was built. However in the very earliest years of the railroad, a number of water stops (also used as wood stops) were built, but they were not individually listed in the reports. Margerum had no doubt been a water station since an early day. In 1890 the Birmingham, Sheffield and Tennessee River Railway built a branch line from Margerum to the Tennessee River, where they were building a new town called Riverton. The M&C

never built a station at Margerum, and it is never listed in the reports as a freight or passenger stop.

FOSSICK QUARRY BRANCH

In 1870 T. L. Fossick & Co. built a branch from the M&C main line to their "fine stone quarry" two miles north of Dickson, Alabama. No station was built here by the M&C.

DICKSON

A wooden, combined freight and ticket office depot was built here in 1857. It survived the