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The Tuscumbia, Courtland and Decatur Railroad

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The Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad

Introduction

Many a railroad story has been written about early railroads, the pitfalls, trials and tribulations, and ultimately their place in history.

How many people know, for instance, that the Memphis & Charleston (M&C) was the first railroad to link major sections of the country together, the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi River, from Charleston, South Carolina to Memphis, Tennessee? Not even the famous B&O can claim that record—close as it came.

This came about on 27 March, 1857, when the M&C completed the last rail section of its road. On April 1st, it opened the entire road from Memphis, Tennessee to Stevenson, Alabama. At Stevenson it linked up with the Nashville & Chattanooga, and gave the Southern planters a direct link to the sea via the Charleston or Savannah ports. From Memphis and points west, a new chapter would be written in American economic history.



Travel to the Atlantic coast now became possible by way of the M&C to Chattanooga; thence to Atlanta, 138 miles via the Western and Atlantic; from Atlanta via the Georgia Railroad, 171 miles to Augusta; the final leg being over the South Carolina Canal & Railroad from Hamburg (across the Savannah River from Augusta) to Charleston, a trip of 135 miles. Overall, the train of the times sped at some 18 miles an hour average, during daylight hours, traversing some 780 odd miles in 5 to 6 days.

When the M&C completed its road on that March day, it achieved quite a feat, accomplishing over 271 miles of railroad in less than 5 years, at a time when most, if not all, work was done by hand. Not the least of its difficulties was surviving the perils of the legislature of three states. Then there was the land itself. Beset financially throughout for hard currency, it was surely a time to try the best of men. Even so, they succeeded.

In composing this narrative, data has been researched from the Annual Reports of the M&C, as compiled by the Southern Railway after its takeover of the M&C in the 1890's; the Southern Railway legal documents; and early reporting of the *American Railroad Journal*; the *Memphis Eagle*; the *Memphis Appeal*; and the *Southern Advocate* (Huntsville).

Many astute business men in the United States saw the Tennessee River as the best route to the Mississippi River and points west. A very plausible concept, except that is, for an area called "Muscle Shoals," a most impassable section of the Tennessee River between Decatur and Tusculumbia, Alabama. Many of these early businessmen were from as far away as Charleston, South Carolina, a convenient port on the Atlantic coast. They were most desirous of having their trade increased with the West and especially Memphis, Tennessee. In fact, it is to the city of Charleston that the M&C owes much of its beginnings, and financial aid as well.

The subject of railroading remained among the major conversations of many leaders and businessmen of the South during those early years of the 1830's and 1840's. Many could see the wisdom of the "Iron Horse" replacing the canals, and the horse and wagon, the latter being constantly hampered by nature and weather; whereas, the Iron Horse was not so hampered, or so the expounders of the railroads were heard to say. Critics, on the other hand (and there were many of them), were quick to say 'nay' for reasons as far-reaching as religious, to basic self-preservation. They were quick to say that the Iron Horse, although not a very fast 'animal' so to speak, caused horses to bolt when encountered, fires to start in cars, on persons and along right-of-ways, and any number of other discomforts to the good people of the counties they traveled through.

However, in the interest of economy, local businessmen helped the public overcome the early fears of railroading, so much so that railroads have become a part of the countryside forever.

One such businessman was Major David Hubbard, lawyer and landowner in the Huntsville, Alabama, area, who traveled to Pennsylvania to witness what a great new invention, the railroad, could do for business. Impressed, he returned and reported back to another who had similar wisdom to see the future, Mr. Ben Sherrod of Courtland, a very rich landowner, who with Mr. Hubbard, knew that a venture to bring railroading to the area, was the thing to do.

In 1829, Ben Sherrod and David Hubbard, along with the people of Tuscumbia, determined to build a railroad between their town and the Tennessee River. A charter was obtained in an act of Alabama, approved January 15, 1830 (Acts of Alabama 1829, P. 46), thus making the history books as the first railroad chartered west of the Alleghenies. A sufficiency of stock was immediately subscribed and the company organized, and, on May 1, 1830, the stockholders elected the first Board of Directors, consisting of 13 members. Ben Sherrod was elected President. David Hubbard was elected as

Director, and David Deshler as Engineer (*North Alabamian*, 13 April 1833).

The object of this railroad was to connect the town of Tuscumbia with the Tennessee River; the distance being a fraction over 2 miles. Although some surveys were accomplished, the charter did not allow for condemned right-of-ways, and one principal landowner utterly refused to sell his right-of-way; nothing further was done until April 1831, when the company succeeded in purchasing the plantation in question. Then in June 1831, an “interesting operation of breaking ground” for the RR was held on 5 June, 1831. Surveys were commenced in February 1832, and in May a portion of the line was put under contract, and the work of graduation commenced. On 12 January 1832, the Alabama legislature passed an act to incorporate the Florence Bridge Co., for the building of a bridge between Tuscumbia and Florence. It was to be constructed for both railroad and carriage traffic as a toll bridge. (*American Railroad Journal*, 31 Dec. 1836)



With minimum problems, the Tuscumbia Railway was completed and opened for business on June 12, 1832. A newspaper account of the day describes the opening of the railroad in the following editorial:

“On the 12th instant the Tuscumbia Railway was opened in conformity with vigorous arrangements. At an early hour, a large concourse had assembled, to witness the operation of the first Railroad ever constructed in Alabama. Cars were in motion throughout the day, for the accommodation of visitors. A procession formed at 11:00 A.M., of the cars, drawn by one horse crowded with the beauty and fashion of the country and accompanied with a band of music. The procession passed to the foot of the Road, where an extensive accommodation had been prepared for the occasion. Several thousand persons partook of the hospitality of the railroad company. The utmost harmony and good humor prevailed. The whole scene was gay and exciting, and the celebration creditable to the company. It was truly novel and interesting to witness the graceful flight of the majestic car, in a country where but yesterday, the paths of the Indians were the only traces of human footsteps” (*Florence Gazette*, 12 June 1832).

Some brief comments from the day give an insight to the times, and early railroading construction and operations:

“The work (Tuscumbia RR) extends from Main Street in Tuscumbia to the Depot at the Tennessee River, a distance of about 2-1/10 miles, and was completed on the first of June, at the aggregate cost of \$9,500, or \$4,523.85 per mile, including the building of a viaduct over a ravine. Lumber cars are in use drawn by horses. A cotton shed and a car house have been erected in Tuscumbia” (*ibid*).

“A pleasure car (the Tuscumbia) has been going back and forth between Tuscumbia and the river since

June 12 last, as well as three lumber (flat) cars. A new pleasure car is presently being built in town by Mr. Williams, with its trucks coming from Baltimore. Patterns for turning out castings (wheels) have been sent to Russel's Valley Iron Works, with an order for 4 sets of wheels to be immediately furnished. An order has been placed for 8 wrought iron switches from Napier Iron Works in Tennessee" (*American Railroad Journal*, 3 August 1833).

"The construction of the roadbed is of cedar sleepers laid transversely on the road, perpendicular to roadbed, 5 feet from centre to centre. Oak string pieces, 5 by 7 inches; capped with an iron rail, 2 inches by 1/2 inch, were placed ton top to serve as rails, and nailed in place. The width of track is 4 feet 9-1/4 inches, between inner edges of the rails, and the iron came from the Tennessee Valley iron works called the Napier Iron Works, as well as the Russell's Iron Works, located in the present city of Russellville."

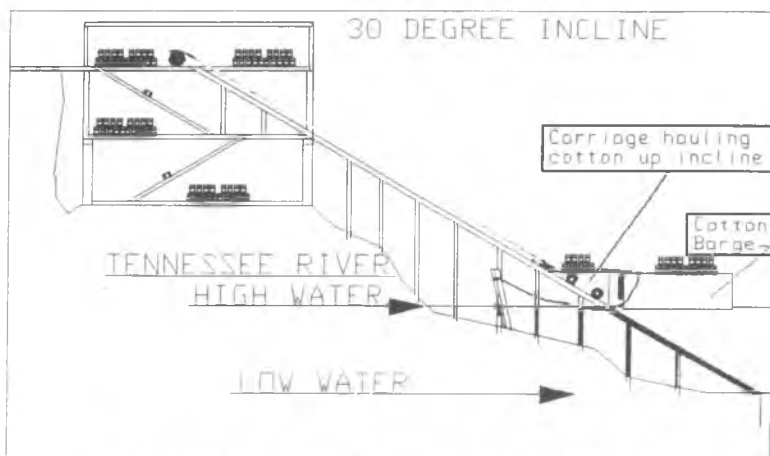




“A good portion of the line is curved, and some curves are on a radii of 400 feet. The maximum inclination in the grade is 20 feet per mile. One truss bridge, 36 feet high from the bottom of a ravine, and 274 feet long overall, as well as several embankments for roadbeds of 15 feet in height, had to be built” (*American Railroad Journal*, 3 August 1833).

“One terminus of the Tuscumbia Railroad was at the Tennessee River, in a ‘terminal’ building of unusual structure, contracted for early last spring, to be finished by the 1st of December 1832. Brick works is up, and carpenters at work. The inclined plane is nearly finished and the floors laid down. In a few days it will be ready for the business of shipping cotton and receiving business. It is located upon an elevated point of land near the junction of Spring Creek with the Tennessee River, is 75 feet long and parallel with the river, extending back 60 feet, and is 3 stories high. The first floor is of strong masonry, the other two of brick work. The upper floor, the one being level with the railroad, is elevated above the high water mark 62.37 feet, and above the low water mark of 85.75

feet. The front next to the river is set back 105 feet, horizontal distance, from the edge of low water. The inclined plane is designed to be worked by horse power, when proper gearing, the construction of which is in progress, shall have been erected back of the house for that purpose. For the present a wheel and axle will be used. A floating wharf will be constructed to accommodate itself to the inclined plane, alongside which boats will land and discharge their freight, to be elevated into the warehouse by means of the inclined plane" (*American Railroad Journal*, 31 December 1836).



TUSCUMBIA WAREHOUSE 1833



Remnants of this structure still exist today, even after the Union Army's attempt to destroy its capabilities with tons of dynamite. If reconstructed today it would represent the first railroad depot in Alabama, and most probably west of the Alleghenies.

Creation of the Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad

An early president of the Tuscumbia Railroad, Benjamin Sherrod, pressed his companions from the northern counties of Alabama on 8 October 1832, prior to completion of the Tuscumbia Railway, to form a new venture called the Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad Company. Merits for it lay in the fact that the only really impassable portion of the Tennessee River by boat, was an area called Muscle Shoals, a rocky river stretch running from near Decatur to Tuscumbia, Alabama, requiring laborious effort by wagon trains to move cargo around, often under less than ideal conditions. A railroad would change all that, being unhampered by weather as such. From Franklin, Morgan, and Lawrence counties, delegates came to a convention held in Courtland on the 8th day of October, 1831, for the purpose of devising the best mode of operation to continue the Tuscumbia to some eligible point on the Tennessee River, above Muscle Shoals. "In pursuance of measures then and there adopted, a charter was granted by the Legislature approved on 13th of January 1832, incorporating the Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad Company (CT&D), and the act to incorporate the TC&D was approved 13 January



1832 (Laws of Alabama 1831-1832, p. 67), for the purpose of operating a Railroad from Tuscumbia to Decatur, and to make such extensions and lateral Railroads as to them may seem expedient." The Board of Directors (appointed by charter) met at Courtland, accepted the charter, and appointed their engineer, with instructions forthwith to commence the surveys. On the 1st Monday in March 1832, a stockholders meeting was convened in Courtland, where approximate estimates of work were presented by the engineer. A board of directors was chosen with Ben Sherrod as President, D. S. Goodloe Director, and David Hubbard Secretary." (*Southern Railway System Legal Documents*, Southern Railway Historical Assoc.)

"The plan was to use the same 'standard' gauge rail, strap iron stringers, and tie system, placed as before." This was called "A 43 mile adventure of uncertain future." On 13 January 1832, construction began. The survey finds "the whole length of the TC&D is to be 43-1/10 miles; of which distance 36-55/100 miles is straight line, and 6-55/100 is curved line. There is but one curve, on a radius of less than 1542 feet, which is 1380 feet. The profile is undulating, under a maximum grade of 25 feet to the mile. The construction in all aspects is to be the same as the Tuscumbia, excepting that the sleepers on this road are only 4 feet apart from centre to centre, and that about 1/3 of the distance is, and will be, lined with cedar (instead of oak) string pieces. The cost of this road will average a little under \$5,000 per mile."

"The whole length of the road between its termination upon the Tennessee River (inclusive of the Tuscumbia section) will be 45-20/100 miles; single track, with turnouts and side lines about every two miles."

"Operations were commenced to Leighton 10 and 1/4 miles on 20 August 1833, to Town Creek 14 and 3/4 miles on 4 March 1834, to Courtland 8 miles on 4 July 1834, and finally the last 10 miles to Decatur on 15 December 1834 with the arrival of the Locomotive (Fulton) and a string of cars." (*American Railroad Journal*, 31 December 1836, TC&D 3rd Annual Report.)

“Cars limited to 15 lumber and 3 pleasure cars, instead of the 50 to 75 needed, and the locomotives being inferior, therefore horses were used during that period from early 1834 until January 1836. However, because the horse path was not graveled and the road just being completed as the winter set in, the path became almost impassable from the mud, and therefore reduced passage sufficiently so that customers sought other means to move their merchandise during the winter of ‘34 and ‘35. By about July 1st 1835, the number of cars had been augmented so that they were able to keep up with the business, and at the same time two new locomotives were ordered, one from Baldwin and the other from Liverpool. The Baldwin “Triumph” was placed on the road on June 1st 1836, but the other has not arrived, due to the large backorders at Liverpool. Since June 1836, no horses have been used. Prior to that, from July 1835 to June 1836, horses were used 1/2 to 1/3 of the time. The railroad has a fluctuating business, in that it must wait for much of its business to come from barges up river, and therefore the costs of doing business with horses versus locomotives is as follows. While the company is at recess, prepared to do business but waiting, their power is idle, but the expense, if powered by horses, is constantly the same; while with locomotives, the power being provided for the maximum, it costs nothing during the recess (except on interest on capital) because the engine laid up, the engineer who conducts her takes his place in the shops of the Company and earns his wages there.” (*American Railroad Journal*, 31 December 1836)

“On the 4th of July 1834, the TC&D was officially opened between the two principal towns of Tuscumbia and Decatur. The motive power used had been horses, up to about the 1st of June 1834, when the company received a locomotive engine from the E. Bury Company of Liverpool. (See data on engines below for particulars.) Her performance is such as has been determined by the Board of Directory to dispense with horses altogether, so soon as a sufficient number of engines for their business can be procured. With a light load this engine has at diverse times attained a velocity of 40 miles an hour. Pine and ash wood has been used as fuel; but

so soon as the road is finished to Decatur, it is contemplated coal will be used exclusively, as can be obtained cheaply, and is entirely safe from sparks.” (ibid.)

Engineers

The first engineer, who at first was referred to as ‘Captains’ and at times as ‘Runners’, was Mr. Jack Lawson, an English bred mechanic, who was the pioneer locomotive engineer of America, running the first locomotive on the Baltimore & Susquhannah RR. In 1831, Mr. Lawson brought the locomotive over and ran her during the 12 months then in operation. He had been on the winning engine, the “Rocket” at the famous Manchester race. He came to Tuscumbia to run the “Fulton” when it arrived. The Second Engineer was William C. Francis, a French sailor, the third Engineer George Pittman, the fourth Engineer was Jim (called ‘Uncle Jimmy’ later in 1850’s) Crawford, the fifth Engineer was only known as Graves, and the sixth Engineer was George Geise.



“These Engineers ran small cars, two horses to each car, working tandem. Those that carried passengers had bannisters on top like stage coaches, and those that carried freight were small flat cars (called ‘Burden’ cars early on) with tarpaulins to cover the goods. The engines had no cab or pilot. To prevent the wheels from slipping, a Negro sat on the bumper with a bucket of sand and a cow’s horn, which he poured the sand through to the track below.” (Decatur paper, nd)

Locomotives

A roster of equipment as of August 1836 reported in *The American Railroad Journal*, 31 December 1836:

1st locomotive—**Fulton**, 0-4-0, manufactured by Edward D. Bury of Liverpool, England, and was placed on the road on 1 June, 1834. She had 4.6 Diameter Drivers, 8X16 cylinders, and weighed only 5 tons, at a cost of \$4,915.04. She has been a useful engine for her class.

2nd locomotive—**Pennsylvania**, 2-2-0T, manufactured by Robert Stephenson & Co., Fourth Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, in October 1831, for the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, and was reallocated to the Philadelphia Norristown & Germantown RR on 4 December 1832, as the **Pennsylvania**. She originally had 60 inch drivers and Cyl/Stroke of 11X16. The PN&G did not like the engine, and in 1833, the Long and Norris Company rebuilt it as a 2-2-0 tank engine (the first in the U.S.) and presumably changing her drivers to 48 inches and the Cyl/Stroke to 10X18. The TC&D RR purchased this engine from the PN&G for \$5,880.37. (Note: It is presumed that when David Hubbard went to Pennsylvania to review the engine for purchase, he saw the original engine that had arrived from England. He would not necessarily have been aware of the changes made after that, and so he and the Tuscumbia Railroad were quite

surprised at what they finally received.) “She weighed in at 9 to 10 tons and with no tender, and with most of her weight over the drivers she was too heavy for the roadway. Her boiler was also deficient in fire surface, so that she is incapable of generating sufficient steam (pressure). After a trial run on the road, she was taken off and placed alongside the machine shop, where she has been to this day, to drive the machinery about the works. A common engine is being put up to take her place, and as soon as it can be done, the **Pennsylvania** will be taken to pieces and rebuilt (again) by enlarging the boiler, and putting her on 8 wheels, carrying the front part on 4 small wheels (2.5 Dia.), and using the adhesion of driving wheels, by means of outside cranks and connections. When this is done she will answer a good purpose and be easy on the road.”



3rd locomotive—**Comet**, 0-4-0, manufactured by the West Point Foundry Association, N. Y., and was placed on the road in June 1835. She had 54 inch drivers, with Cyl/Stroke of 10X20, and a weight of 7.5 to 8 tons, at a cost of \$7,959.82. This engine has been of very little use to the company, until about the first of February 1835, in consequence of her bursting her cylinders because a defect in the casting of the cylinders, as well as a bad arrangement of the slides, caused one of the cylinders to give way on the 15th of

June 1835. Wrote to Mr. Kemble, the manager of West Point, advising him of the deficiency of the engine, requesting a new pair of slides and cylinders—with all practicable haste—which he promised to do. By October/November 1835, no word was received on new parts, so the TC&D works rebuilt the engine, and in January 1836, she was put back into service. When she was first put on the road she had 4 wheels of equal diameter (54 inches) but as she had no connection between the hind and fore wheels, the large wheels forward proved to be a disadvantage and we disposed with them, and put the forward part of the engine on a truck car with four wheels (30 inch diameter) which causes her to take the curves much better, and is found to answer an excellent purpose. This engine performs as a freight engine very well.”

This was the first all iron frame locomotive built in the U.S. (*American Locomotives*, by John H. White, John Hopkins Press).

In the ARJ of January 15, 1835, mention is made of “hubs cast of iron with wrought iron spokes and tires. The outside frame is entirely iron, securely bolted. All the working parts are cast iron, and appeared to have been finished with great care. It will carry 10 tons at the rate of 18 MPH on a level road.”

4th locomotive—”Triumph, 4-2-0, made by M.W. Baldwin of Philadelphia, arrived on the road on 1 June, 1836, at a cost of \$7,091.55, and performs well. She weighs in at 6.5 tons (without water), with Cyl/Stroke of 10.5X18, and drivers of 54 inches. She is remarkable for her great simplicity of her gearing, and at the same time, for the strength of all her parts, and has been active in her service since her arrival, and repair cost only a modest \$11.10 to date. In wet weather her drivers have adhesion problems lacking good weight on her drivers, a deficiency common to all engines, and a plan to obviate this condition has

been with us for some time. The plan proposed is this—let a sort of hopper (to hold a gallon) be arranged just forward of the driving wheels, and above the frame of the engine, from which a tube will be projected downward to within a small distance of the face of the rail. The hopper being filled with dry sand, will feed through the tube upon the rail. A cock, or regulator will be constructed in the tube to allow the sand in such quantities as may be desirable, or shut it off entirely. For want of sand, water may be used, as it is well known that the adhesion is quite good with a perfectly wet rail as when perfectly dry.” (First known instance of the use of sand for traction in the U.S.)

“Financially, the road produced a modest profit of approximately \$20,000, which would have been increased by \$10,000 if the two locomotive mishaps cited above had not happened, thereby requiring that ‘expensive’ horses be utilized for awhile longer. This unrealized tractive power, forcing continuation of horsepower, also caused much customer dissatisfaction with merchandise piling up, etc. The financial condition in 1836: Total shares 4,563=\$456,300, receipts=\$207,396, disbursements=\$164,216, and cash on hand=\$43,180.” (*American Railroad Journal*, 26 November 1836)

An Alabama newspaper reported that a typical TC&D RR business for one day, in 1838, would be as follows (6 March 1838):

“One day this week we noticed that the TC&D had 4 locomotives with their train of cars, 51 in all, pass up the road with full loads of goods (about 110 tons) destined we believe for East Tennessee. The trip from Tusculumbia to Decatur and back again in 12 hours, a distance of 80 miles. A four horse team with a load of 33 hundreds, would travel about 20 miles a day, requiring about 5 days to make the trip. Therefore, to match the 4 engines and their cars would require 575 wagons, the same number of men, and 2,340 horses.”

In 1845, a typical timetable for the TC&D would look like the following;

- From Tuscumbia by Railroad is 43 miles to Decatur. Steamboat from Decatur to Gunter's Landing is 60 miles (via the Tennessee River).
- Four Horse Post Coaches from the landing to Kingston (railhead of the Ga RR) is 97 miles.
- Railroad from Kingston to Charleston is 370 miles.
- Time from Huntsville is 69 hours at a fare of (from Tuscumbia) of \$22.00.
- Time from Huntsville to Montgomery, Alabama is 3 days for a fare of \$26.00. (*Tuscumbia Franklin Democrat*, 3 November 1845)

The Paducah *Daily News* in 1872, reported on the reminiscences of a writer about the TC&D:

“Wooden stringers with cross-ties every 8 to 10 feet constituted the roadbed. Upon these stringers was laid flat bars (rail) of iron about 3 inches wide and a 3/4 inch thick, fastened with small spikes. This did very well while there was mule power, but when the heavier engines with their loads of cotton began running over these rails, the stringers would settle between the cross-ties, loosening the spikes, bending the ends of the bars upward and more likely to pass over the cars wheels than under it. These were called ‘snake-heads’, and when the engineer saw them he



would stop the engine and have the bars railed down. The locomotives then did not carry cowcatchers, or the road would soon have been stripped of iron. Freight trains made, with good luck, about 5 miles an hour, and passenger about 8 to 10. A recollection of a trip from Tusculumbia to Courtland, 20 miles up the road, was made without accident on the trip out, but on the trip back, about 4 miles from home, the car gave a more than usual violent lurch, and upon looking out to see what was the matter, we beheld the Fulton and her runner on a trial of speed to see which could reach a clump of trees first. The man won. The Fulton, apparently in disgust, turned over on her side.”

Railroad expansion, in the meantime, continued; at least the talking stages progressed. There was talk in South Carolina of meeting the TC&D with the Great Western. There was also talk of a southwestern branch of the Charleston & Cincinnati reaching the Tennessee Valley and possibly meeting up with the TC&D, or possible forming their own parallel road! There was a road under construction from Augusta to Athens, Georgia to continue on to terminate “... at a point on the Tennessee River a little below the Suck (outside Chattanooga)”. (*American Railroad Journal*, 31 December 1836)

A charter was obtained by a company in January 1834, authorizing the construction of a railroad from the town of Moulton, to intersect the TC&D at or about Courtland, with a capital of \$100,000. Moulton is situated about 15 miles due south of Courtland.

A company was also incorporated in January (1834), with a capital of \$75,000 to construct a railroad from Athens (situated 15 miles north of Decatur) to the Tennessee River. Stock subscribed and surveys made, but outcome unknown. (*ibid.*)

A charter was granted in January (1834) to a company styled Alabama & Tennessee RR, with a capital of \$300,000

to be constructed between Florence, Alabama and Pulaski, Tennessee, a distance of about 60 miles. The stock is taken and some surveys have been made, but the work not yet commenced. The citizens of Elkton, Tennessee (20 miles north of Athens) are very anxious to connect themselves with the TC&D, by way of Athens, Alabama (ibid.).”

As for the TC&D it had its own growth concept, how to get from Decatur to Huntsville, or some suitable point in Madison County. The then Chief Engineer, David Deshler, was ordered to complete surveys appropriately. Also in 1839, the TC&D’s charter was amended to authorize the TC&D to go west and meet up with the LaG&M at LaGrange, Tennessee, an act approved February 2, 1839.

However, financial problems beset the TC&D, and in 1840, the TC&D became insolvent, made so by default in payment of interest upon its bonds, and in difficulties arising out of certain transactions between the individual officers and directors. Ultimately, the financial ‘snake-head’ that derailed the TC&D was the suit brought about by a stockholder in 1840 for interest not paid. Although Ben Sherrod kept the TC&D financially afloat up to 1847, with his own monies, it was the steamboat operators that ran the infant railroad (*Southern Railway System Legal Documents*).

August 20, 1840, the TC&D was leased by Braham Merrill for 3 years with new repairs being made daily. Locomotive engines were under the oversight of James Crawford (Interview, John L. McWilliams, 1995).

A few months after Ben Sherrod’s death in 1847, the TC&D was sold on September 22, at a sale at public auction (Act #98 of the Alabama State Legislature), to David Deshler (Note: records of this case at Huntsville, Alabama were destroyed during the war), to be reorganized as the Tennessee Valley Railroad Company, and await the coming of the M&C.. There was an act to incorporate as the Tennessee Valley RR Company on 10 February, 1848, with the power to purchase the Tuscumbia RR, which was consummated, but

nothing was done to rehabilitate the railroad until 1850, when it merged with the Memphis & Charleston Railroad. What form of deed is not known because of the war. The Supreme Court of Alabama specifically confirmed the title to the M&C in 1889.

And so, the first railroad, the beginning phase of a West-East rail link between Memphis and Charleston, was formed. Next came the second important link in the M&C story, that of the Memphis & LaGrange Railroad in Tennessee. It took until the mid 1850's for the vital linkage between Decatur and Stevenson to commence. By taking that first step in building the Tuscumbia and then the Tuscumbia, Courtland & Decatur Railroad, North Alabama made railroading history.



TEACHING OUR EYES TO SEE: Elements Along the Line

Part of a research project this past year was to photograph the railroad depot sites along the old Memphis & Charleston (M&C) route, now the Norfolk Southern route. It was also a classic training period for my eyes, in what to see, and what to look for historically.

We traveled along the railroad route from Huntsville to Stevenson, and also from Huntsville to Tuscumbia. On our sweep east we visited Woodville, Gurley, Paint Rock, Larkinsville, Scottsboro, Hollywood and Stevenson, the end of the M&C line. Going west, we stopped at Madison, Bella - Mina, Decatur, Hillsboro, Trinity, Courtland, Town Creek, Florence, Tuscumbia and Tuscumbia Landing.

At each sit we took photographs of the current depot, or its old foundation. Photographs in themselves are very valuable records. They do not replace the eye, but they can serve as the eye's memory and give us a second look.

The Decatur depot is a classic Santa Fe design, quite different from the other depots on the line. It probably reflects the L&N influence. It is white stucco in appearance with a red tile roof. At one time it served tracks on both sides of the building. It is the kind of building that you might like to make a model of.



Look down at the old foundation of the depot at Decatur, and you see much more than is at first evident. You see that the foundation has several different layers, suggesting that the flooring had been



renovated several times, and with careful scrutiny you can almost tell about when, by the makeup of the material used. You can see where the ticket office stood in the outline of the foundation. It is even obvious to the eye that the building supported both the depot and the freight offices, by

the step-up portion in the foundation, and the remains of the platforms, front and back. At Gurley and Larkinsville you can see similar foundations, each describing its past in its own way.

At other sites, for instance at Hollywood, the actual remains of the freight section can still be seen in the weeds. The area is now part of the grounds of an oil company. Side tracks are still partially used for tank cars. The siding doesn't stop there though. It continues on into the weeds and earth, crosses the road and disappears from sight altogether. Strange that it wasn't taken up as they usually are.



Larkinsville also has sidings, only one of which is used. It was probably more trouble than it was worth to pull the other one up. So they left us the remains of an old siding, track and all, plus some other rails, frogs, and other railroad

things rusting away on the siding. An old warehouse still remains in use, but its siding is gone.



The freight depot at Scottsboro is a brick structure, built in a similar fashion as the one in Huntsville, but considerably shorter in length, and about as wide. It's in almost as bad shape as Huntsville's is, although its character is still in evidence. It wasn't that

long ago that a siding ran up to the badly deteriorated freight ramp. There is enough ramp there though for you to see much of the original (I would guess) structure. Good early structural details are still evident. They really did build them to last in those days. The building appears to be used for some purpose, probably still by the railroad. The red brick has been whitewashed and is still in good shape. The roof appears to be still reasonably intact and well shingled. The dentil detail is not as elaborate as Huntsville's but is in good condition. The freight doors are of the same genealogy as those in Huntsville's. In fact, the whole building is designed in the same fashion. The one noticeable difference would be the attic vents in the end walls of the building. Huntsville's is circular and Scottsboro is diamond shaped.



Preservation Alert!
Save This Building

Some depots are shared by both the railroad and private interests as is the case of Stevenson's depot. It was built collectively by both the M&C and the Nashville & Chattanooga railroads, and to some extent still retains its original character. Of special interest is the double tower on



top of the building, enabling one to see both lines as they converged into one. Its design did not follow the pattern of the other M&C brick buildings, containing more windows than others do, with a larger ticket window.

Upon observation, you see that many depots stood in small town squares, many of which still contain several buildings that probably are as old as the depots were. Too many are now abandoned relics of the past. These squares once were bustling meeting places. There were always people waiting for the train to come in, bringing with it passengers and mail every day. In your mind you can return to that magic moment in the past, and see people hurrying to meet the train. Hear the gentle noises of conversations as people waited, until slowly, as the train approached, their excitement grew louder. Today these squares are deserted, and when a train does come through, it makes the only noise, with loud rumbling, and it doesn't stop.

Courtland has made its square into a historical visit with the past. Their depot still stands on the south side along the mainline, today serving the community as a library. A fast freight whistling in from the east is alerting everyone in Courtland to watch out, here it comes. Picture it racing toward town coming closer and closer. It doesn't come to a stop. It hasn't stopped in years. But, in those days you could watch it come into town, slowly, steaming to a stop at the



old depot, bell clanging, steam blowing and breaks squealing. The conductor would step down holding a small wooden step. Placing it down under the last step, he would reach up and help someone from the train. Porters would gather to help with luggage, as crowds of people greeted each other warmly.

Around the engine there is always someone oiling the gears, and an engineer waving from the engineer's window. A small boy, standing on the platform just out of the way, stares at the engine and the engineer, longing in his eyes. Those were the days. How different from today's train as it rushes past with a raucous blast of its air horn, to disappear around the bend out of town.

Over in Florence the depot sites are long gone, but there remains today the iron trestle that crosses most of the Tennessee River, stopping short of the Florence side. On the shore the trestle picks up again and heads inland. Obviously not in use today, rail traffic was stopped about the turn of the century. It's strange that it hasn't been torn down yet. A piece of history that has escaped the scrap heap.



On into Tuscumbia you enter an even older period of depot history. The very first depot, probably west of the Alleghenies, certainly in Alabama, was built on a site along the Tennessee River in 1832 for the Tuscumbia Railroad. This

depot was of a unique design. It was three stories high and sat on a bluff just up from the river. Its top floor was even with the railroad at the top of the bluff. A schute (chute) ran down through the building on a 30 degree incline exiting through the second floor, into the river, ending at the low tide mark. A floating wharf allowed the bales of cotton delivered down the chute to be loaded onto barges and steamboats plying the rivers. A horse drawn winching system pulled products being delivered, up the incline.



During the Civil War the Union forces dynamited the building practically out of existence. But, today you can still see some of the original stonework, and for quite a distance around, you can find hundreds of pieces of brick blown there by the explosions.

These are some of the details you should look for when reviewing historical sites. Even if the historical aspect of the building has been altered by new owners, as is the case of the freight depot in Town Creek which is privately owned, it still occupies its original site. The Tuscumbia Depot, which is now an old age home, still occupying its original site.

In any case look closely for the details that are left behind, and study carefully the shape and character of what is still in existence. There is much that the trained eye can see along the line.

ALONG THE LINE—A Partial Pictorial Journey

Tuscumbia



Trinity

Belle Mina



Madison



Mud Creek (above)



Stevenson—The End of the Line!



THE HUNTSVILLE YARD: Vanishing Before Your Eyes

Several years ago I spent a sunny Saturday morning taking photographs of the Norfolk Southern (nee M&C) yard in Huntsville. I made model trains quite a lot then, and the yard offered an abundance of railroad history and most of all, details. I spent some time roaming around the yard, taking photos whenever something of interest caught my eye.

There was an old coal chute in front of a storage building. It was an odd piece of railroad equipment so I photographed it extensively. Apparently it was used to load coal into trucks. A hopper car of sorts would open its chute and coal would fall into a pit below, from which the coal chute mechanism would move it along into the coal chute. There, a screw mechanism would flow the coal along up the chute and out into the truck. The top portion contained a motor that apparently aimed the flexible end of the chute while it filled the truck.



Behind the storage building I found a great mixture of railroad equipment, some quite old. There were switch stands, switch tie rods, switch plates, bolts, nuts, a potpourri of railroad detail. All of this was randomly stored near or next to the building.

There were sidings, semicircular in shape, and



between them and the main lines a large area was used for the storage of all kinds of rail, switch track, frogs, ties, and a great many other things a railroad yard needs for repair of the road. Quite a bit was old-style railroad equipment.

Naturally I took photos of all this wonderful yard detail. Several freight cars of various types were on the sidings, ready for their photographs to be taken, as was an old diesel from the Central of Georgia days.







Across the street from the Depot several old buildings stood in a row, begging to be reviewed. The one brick building, a small 10 by 10 size, appeared to be a very old power station, judging by its style and brickwork. It was an idle relic of the past. To its left stood a small octagonal building that was used as a



line telephone booth in its day. This day it stood there, an odd shaped cement building, four foot round, with a funny shaped roof. Next to it a wooden building, gray, and not very large, was presumably used to store flammables of some kind, judging by the sign hung up outside the large freight door ("KEEP OPEN LIGHTS AND FIRES AWAY"). To the right of the power station stood another gray wooden building, about the same size as the first, but with an unknown purpose and with two large freight doors.

Directly across the tracks from them stands the Dillworth Lumber yard, which sits on the site of the old M&C hotel, variously called the Huntsville Hotel, the Donegan Hotel, and the Venable Hotel (so named for the manager of the hotel).



Perhaps the strangest building was one that sat just inside the yard. It too was a gray wooden building, but was only about five feet square, with one door and two little windows, and sat up high of the ground, on top of several layers of railroad ties. Was it a watchman's shanty?



My guess is that we will never know. For over the past year, all the buildings except the one next to the coal chute have disappeared. The chute has been taken down and was last seen lying on the ground where tracks used to run. The buildings across the street have been destroyed, and all are buried in a hole dug where they last stood. All, except for the octagonal building. I hear that it is somewhere in town on someone's property. One like it can be seen at the Chase museum.

As for the storage area in the yard, well most of it has been "cleaned up" and disappeared. Oh there is still a bit left, but its not the same. And behind the remaining storage building where so much exciting detail had been kept, most of it has been removed, to who knows where.

The moral of this story is that change is a fact of life, and if you are historically inclined, and you see something of historical value just lying around, or going to pot, rusting from non use, or maybe stored out of the way, then stop and take photographs, of it while you can. For one day when you go by, it might be gone. Here today; gone tomorrow.



THE FREIGHT DEPOT: Our Challenge for Today

The year is 1856, and a fledgling railroad called the Memphis & Charleston has arrived in Huntsville (Oct. 13th). One of the tasks to be fulfilled is the putting up of a brick freight house (completed 1856 but no cost given in the annual reports) so that the local merchants can get their products to market all year round.

Today, that same freight depot stands as a monument to railroad history. In its more than 140 years of existence, it has served the public, and three railroads—the M&C, Southern RR and the current railroad, Norfolk Southern, with distinction. It is the oldest continuously used freight depot in the United States, with only one being older, and that in England.



Let's just take a look at that building. It's falling apart, isn't it? The roof is a disaster, and most probably leaks. Bricks are falling out from around the foundation. Pigeons have nests throughout. Paint is flaking off all over. Wood is rotting everywhere. It certainly appears to be in need of a major overhaul. One might question whether it should be saved at all.



The answer to that is, most definitely. It should be saved. Norfolk Southern, as owner, will pay taxes, but seems to be loath to send in repair crews. It took the effort of the Historic Huntsville Foundation, in particular Harvie Jones, to bring about some necessary repairs to the roof. Much discussion on saving the old building is going on behind the scenes, but so far that is all that it is.

In the meantime, although having withstood well more than a hundred years of typical Alabama weather, with a civil war thrown in for good measure, this wonderful old building is now beginning to show her age, rapidly! You only have to wander around the buildings inside to clearly see why it



should be saved. It is a walk into the past. Most of the decor is from the mid 1800's to early 1900's, doors, hardware, paneling, flooring, all of it.

The structure inside is basic brick walling up about 12 feet, and of some varying thicknesses, depending on what the wall is carrying for structure. The rafters, cross beams, cross



members and flying beams appear to be original and in good shape. It was a well built and sturdy building. I've learned that the bricks were made in kilns right nearby. Freight doors leading to the freight

platforms appear to be original, (based upon historical photographs of similar types), and so does their hardware, hinges and such. The flooring most probably has been replaced at least once, although





what is there now is very old. Wouldn't you like to peek under the floorboards, to see what has dropped to the sub flooring over the years?

The outside is of course similar in structure, and has been painted and cared for generally. Except, that is, for the old freight platforms. They show their age. In fact they could be a bit on the dangerous side, and obviously in need of repair. The dentil work, or



gingerbread as you might call it, appears original, however there are places where obvious repairs were made in the past, with a lack of attention to the detail of the original. The brickwork is in sad shape around the foundation. Gaping holes now show in the walls, almost through the

building. These make natural pigeon roosts. The roof is another matter, and as we have described before, is still in need of further attention, and soon.

Under this roof are two, current occupants. *The Huntsville Times* presently stores rolls of paper in the West end portion of the building. The remainder is unused except by Norfolk Southern Railroad personnel, generally for light storage in the main part, and as an office in the East wing. During the Southern Railroad tenure, this same East wing was

modernized, probably in the 1940's. Today it still looks the same as it did then, except for the addition of creature comforts—the air conditioner. A small crew works the office, and is congenial and helpful.



Well, now the question is, what shall we do about this building? Its right to exist is beyond question. Its long and continuous relation to the historic past, by being a part of the old M&C railroad, a railroad with a history of railroad firsts, is without question. However, this building sits right in the middle of the Norfolk freight yards, has very little in the way of a parking area, unless you happen to have wheels that fit the rails. And sitting right on the main line as it does poses a problem in safety. Its basic design doesn't lend itself to being moved from its home very easily. There are some who have been interested in renovating it totally to its original form and using it as a restaurant. Others want it to be incorporated into the Railroad Museum. There is some speculation about moving it. One spot might be in the I565 fill-area nearby, being made into a park.

What do you think? What shall we do with this building? What must we do?

