

Railroads Put Atlanta On The Map

By Lee Kolb

"Forty years ago there was nothing at all here... How then, did she succeed like the goddess whose name she suggests, in outstripping all her older sisters, Augusta, Savannah, Macon and the rest? The answer is found in one word — railways."

— Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 1879 (Courtesy Atlanta Historical Society)

One hundred fifty-one years ago in the Cherokee woodlands, Stephen Long, representing the Western and Atlantic Railroad, hammered a spike into the earth marking that railway's future southern terminus.

President Andrew Jackson packed the Cherokees off to Oklahoma on the infamous "Trail of Tears" a year later. Echoes of Indian war whoops still rang through the pines as white men felled them to make fields for corn and grain.

"The Cherokees were reluctant to give up any more land after 1819 and told the state so, until finally they had to be forcibly removed by the military, which was not a very happy chapter in our history," said Franklin Garrett of the Atlanta Historical Society.

Place names were all the Indians left behind for settlers of English, Scotch and Irish descent to build their new civilization upon. The whites brought in slaves to work the land and carve routes for their "iron horses" through the wilderness. Tacked precariously to Indian ridge trails and laid out atop wagon ruts, these early tracks linked the continental interior with the coastal cities.

"**THE WESTERN &** Atlantic Railroad, which was built by the state of Georgia, is what put us (Atlanta) here in the first place," according to Garrett. "The state of Georgia decided in 1836 that they had better build a railroad to tap the interior and thus help our major seaport, Savannah," said Garrett.

"South Carolina had already done similar things for Charleston, and Charleston and Savannah were very competitive."

The state of Georgia chartered the Western and Atlantic Railroad in 1836. The southern terminus for the Chattanooga spur was located in what is now downtown Atlanta. This spot, first known simply as "Terminus," was not called "Atlanta" until several years later. The Zero Mile Post is still visible near present-day Underground Atlanta. Construction of this first track began in 1837.

The early W&A was a mainline railway, linking Chattanooga, on the Tennessee River with the Chattahoochee River. Access to the navigable Tennessee meant access to the Mississippi River, the great viaduct of frontier commerce.

MARIETTA HAD been founded four years prior to the marking of the W&A southern terminus in 1837.

On Christmas Eve 1842, the first train steamed out of Terminus, bound for Marietta at the end of the line. Vinings and Smyrna began as stations along this route; Cartersville, Dalton and other towns sprouted up along the route towards the Tennessee.

"All sorts of freight" were carried along this route, according to Garrett. Produce and other agricultural products from the interior were hauled down to Savannah, and goods from the coast arrived in these growing communities via the W&A, he said.

"Incidentally, the state made a good investment. The state still owns the railroad. It is under a long-term lease to what is now the CSX Transportation Company. And the state doesn't have to do anything at all about its operation. It employs no railroad personnel, buys no rolling stock, does not maintain the track, and if a derailment occurs the state doesn't pick it up, the railroad does," said Garrett.

"**USING THAT** line (the lease runs up into the next century) calls for a flat rental of \$1 million," he said. A clause in the lease provides that if the earnings of the railroad increase, so does the rent. "For

the last several years, the state has received a check for \$4 million from the railroad. They (the state) made a good investment, he said."

An 1830 DeKalb County census (including present-day Fulton) shows a population of 10,000. "These were mostly farmers," said Garrett. "It was primarily a rural area and it was the railroads that brought some industry here."

These early industry-bringers were steam powered. "It was not until the 1870s that they began to use coal to create the fire," said Garrett.

"They all had names, like ships," said Garrett. "It gave them a personality that a bus or a plane just doesn't have."

THE TECHNOLOGY developed to the point where one locomotive could match several hundred thousand horses in power.

In the 1930s coal locomotives became obsolete as "diesel power began to work its way into railroad operations." The last steam locomotive running the Southern Railroad was retired in 1953, according to Garrett.

"Diesel power is more expensive to purchase originally but costs a lot less to maintain," he said. Some railroads, like the main line of the Pennsylvania between Washington and New York were electrified, said Garrett.

Some steam locomotives are still used for excursions. A vintage steam engine is "a remarkable piece of machinery to look at and listen to," said Garrett.