Historical Document

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The Western & Atlantic Rail Road and its relationship to the Ringgold Depot, 1816 – 1862

By Mark Brainard

It is my desire to briefly establish the details that lead up to what happened on April 12, 1862, with an emphasis on the Western & Atlantic Railroad's depot in Ringgold, Georgia where ever possible. The word depot, by the way, is a railroad abbreviation of the word "depository," as that was what the early railroads called their station buildings along their line where shippers would deposit their goods to be transported by a train of cars.

As early as 1816, Georgians had been reading in Georgia newspapers articles from the United Kingdom about roads of rail used to move large cargoes that weighed several tons. By the 1820's, the revolution in commerce that was being conducted in England with their roads of iron rail had caught the full attention of business men in America and that application was being considered in the states as it was so much faster than any alternative. The concept of a railroad, was a road of rails, the rails providing a relatively frictionless pathway, and that is why, early on, it was two words, rail, and, road. States, in the north, that had large populations and therefore greater wealth began to make the concept of rail roads a reality. In 1827, the Baltimore & Ohio Rail Road was chartered to connect Baltimore with the Ohio River. In the south, the wealthy citizens of Charleston, South Carolina formed, in 1827, a company called the South Carolina Canal and Rail Road Company. The word canal was in the company's name as waterways were the proven method to move commerce, both in England and in America. The idea in Charleston was to divert export shipments away from Savannah by intercepting them at Augusta with either a canal or railroad from Charleston. It wasn't long before the advantages of railroads over canals were realized, namely speed and reliability, and the venture of building a 140-mile-long railroad from Charleston to Augusta was completed in 1833. With that in place, the South Carolina Railroad became the example of cutting-edge transportation technology in the South. South Carolina also desired to build a railroad to Cincinnati in the name of expanding foreign trade through the port of Charleston.

As a result of the South Carolina Railroad's completion to the Georgia border, two months later, on December 20, 1833, the Georgia legislature authorized the Central Railroad Company to build a railroad from Savannah to Macon. One day later, the Georgia Railroad Company was chartered to build a railroad westward from Augusta. The day after that, the

legislature authorized the Monroe Railroad to build a line from Macon northward to Forsyth.

While there had been discussion in Georgia, for years, about digging a canal from the Chattahoochee River to the Tennessee River that would pass somewhere near here, or, in the alternative, building a railroad between those two points, there were two large problems. The first problem was the sovereign nation of Cherokee Indians that sat astride any possible route. The 1835 treaty between the U.S. and the Cherokee Nation had the United States pay the Cherokees $5,000,000 in gold in exchange for the Cherokees to move their nation beyond the Mississippi River. That event opened up the land for use by the State of Georgia. The second question concerned paying for either the canal or railroad's construction. The South Carolina Railroad's 140-mile-long line had cost $900,000, so the question became "who in Georgia could privately invest a similar amount of money to build such a railroad?"

The concept or reason to build a railroad northward from the Chattahoochee River to some point on the Tennessee River was similar to the idea to connect Charleston and Cincinnati. The theory was to intercept agricultural produce from the then western states located along the Mississippi River and move it to the Atlantic seaboard. By doing so, it would probably arrive in Europe faster than if it floated down the Mississippi River, and was then moved by ship around Florida to England. There were some who suggested that the Tennessee River itself would supply crop harvests from both the east and west in the Tennessee River valley to a railroad that connected with it. That idea was brought about as drovers of livestock from Tennessee had, on occasion, entered Georgia to sell their herds at Augusta. The Tennesseans talked of large grain harvests in Tennessee and the fact there was no practical method to move their harvests to any consuming market. Proponents also suggested that railroads would be built from the north down to where ever a railroad outlet on the Tennessee River had been established.

In July, 1836, a convention was held on the idea of building a railroad from South Carolina to Cincinnati in Knoxville. The result of that regional convention was a route that did not enter Georgia and that was viewed as a slight to the State of Georgia. The fact was the route selected to Cincinnati, while it looked easy on a flat sheet of paper, was nearly impossible to build, due to the intervening mountains. Due to what it would cost, the idea was eventually abandoned after several years.

With the mindset that Georgia had to do something or else get left behind in the race for commerce, Georgia had its own Railroad Convention several months later in November, 1836.

The result of that convention, held in Macon, was the idea that the State legislature should undertake a system of railroad improvement beginning with the building of a railroad from some suitable point on the Chattahoochee River to Ross's Landing on the Tennessee River. The thinking was that at the south end of the proposed line other railroads would connect with it and form a network of railroads within the State. Furthermore, it was suggested the effort would be undertaken as an internal improvement for and by the State. As opposed to the South Carolina Railroad, there simply weren't enough private investors to fund it and the other railroad projects in the state so it had to be fully State funded and then, to repay the building costs, it had to be operated by the State. As a result, the Western & Atlantic Railroad was chartered one month after the convention on December 21, 1836. The name of the railroad reflected the railroad's purpose, to serve as a connection between the **Western** states **and** the **Atlantic** Ocean.

In 1837, the then Georgia governor hired an army officer, Colonel Stephen Long, who had been trained as a civil engineer, to conduct a survey for a possible route to somewhere on the Tennessee River for the W&A. In November, 1837, the report of the surveyed routes to the Tennessee line was completed. The cost to prepare a path 66-feet wide for the recommended 108-mile route to the state line was estimated at $2,129,000. That estimate did not include acquiring the real estate, or any track, or equipment, or depots along the line, or anything to build the line into Tennessee. In late December, 1837, the legislature approved of the selected route to the Tennessee line and provided the money to purchase the right of way and to pay the contractors to prepare the route for the first 100 miles. They also set up a Board of Commissioners to oversee the expenditures and provide supervision.

In 1838, those Commissioners awarded construction contracts for the earthwork from a spot in the woods south of the Chattahoochee River northward to the community known as Cross Plains. Beginning in December, 1839, and into early 1840, the contracts were awarded for the roadbed preparation north of Cross Plains and that would include the area above and below Ringgold. To prepare the ground for a right or way, first, the trees had to be cut down and the stumps removed. If earth was to be removed, a horse-drawn earth scraper had to be repeatedly used until the path was lowered to the right level. In 1839, the idea of a tunnel through what was called "Little Blue Ridge" Mountain came about as no tunnel had ever been mentioned in any survey. The contract to dig that tunnel was awarded in 1839, but the project was bigger than the contractor could handle, and he quit and the legislature halted any renewed attempt at that time

because by 1840, the State of Georgia had its own financial worries. It had run out of money to build the W&A and the subject of financing the building of the line is a very deep subject that is beyond the scope to be covered here. At the end of 1841, the state had spent $2,602,457 dollars on the project and had few bridges built, no tunnel, and no rails. The State had also supported other railroad building projects and the total amount of State money spent on such internal improvements was almost 10 million dollars, mostly financed by the sale of state bonds. The State kept raising small amounts that kept the W&A project alive, but just barely. The lack of iron rails for the W&A points to the most obvious problem of building it in that it was isolated from any other railroad that could deliver the many tons of rails, locomotives, or cars to it. The closest railroad was the Georgia Railroad that was building to the west from Augusta.

Finally, in 1841, 33 miles of previously used flat bar iron rail, that weighed 30 tons to the mile, was purchased in Pennsylvania and shipped to Georgia with the intent to lay track for 33 miles northward from the point called "Terminus." Terminus would later be renamed Marthasville and then later, Atlanta. To move over 1000 tons of rails over sixty-five miles of dirt or muddy road from the end of the Georgia Railroad to Terminus required many trips by teams of oxen and well-built carts that contained perhaps a ton of rails on each trip to Terminus. Next, a locomotive was needed to move the rails up to the workers that were laying the track. The Georgia Railroad had a 12-ton, used locomotive, named Florida, that it sold to the State in December, 1842. It was disassembled and hauled in pieces the 65 miles with teams of oxen to serve as the W&A's first locomotive. Once the rails had been laid to the village of Marietta, the W&A began running trains and made a small annual profit. As the railroad track was advanced northward, the trains ran further up the track. The W&A began serving Cartersville in October, 1845, and Kingston, two months later and found that small herds of livestock were being driven from Tennessee for railroad shipment to Augusta.

In September, 1845, the Georgia Railroad was connected to the tracks of the W&A at Marthasville. With that connection in place, the W&A purchased a second, used locomotive named "Alabama" to assist in running trains. All the while, more rail was purchased and the track was extended northward and on July 22, 1847, the W&A had reached Cross Plains, soon to be renamed Dalton. However, one month prior, a wealthy citizen of Dalton, Mr. Absolom Holcomb, held a meeting there and mounted a strong effort to halt the building of the W&A beyond that point so as to make Dalton the northern terminal of the line. Mr. Holcomb pointed

out that a railroad was to be built from Knoxville to Cross Plains and wagon traffic from Chattanooga had any easy two-day trip to reach Dalton. He said a second-attempt to dig a tunnel north of Dalton was a foolish waste of money for the Georgia citizenry who had already incurred the multimillion-dollar debt for the 100-mile-long railroad. Holcomb's position attracted supporters in the legislature but those protests represented a minority view point.

In April of 1848, the contract to extend the railroad from Dalton to Chattanooga was awarded to Col. Allen Cochran and John D. Gray. The contract for the needed bridges was awarded to Asa Bates. Three months later, on July 17, 1848, the first sale of town lots in Ringgold was begun and the newspaper advertisements in Knoxville, Augusta, and Macon that promoted the up-coming sale mentioned in the first line of the ad that Ringgold was located on the Western & Atlantic Railroad. That fact alone was viewed as an asset for Ringgold. The W&A's Chief Engineer, who was the man responsible to the Governor, reported in October, 1849, that the stonework for the Ringgold depot had been contracted to a builder, G.V. Marjoram, and the carpentry contract had been awarded to M.G. Collins, who was also awarded a number of other woodworking contracts for the railroad at that time.

On February 15, 1849, ten years after the land had been purchased and prepared, the local newspaper, "*The Ringgold Republican*," whose editor was to be the station agent here, announced in his paper that the roadbed was ready for the iron rails. But that represented a problem in that the tunnel was not completed so rails could not reach Ringgold. Too, the charter from the State of Tennessee mandated that the W&A had to be in Chattanooga as of January 1, 1850, or else the charter would be revoked. To meet the deadline in nine months, the solution was to move rails and spikes to the edge of Chetoogeta Mountain, formerly called Little Blue Ridge Mountain, and haul everything over the Mountain with oxen and then lay the rails toward Chattanooga. Also, a locomotive and a few 20-foot-long flat cars, would be needed to move the rails along, so the old locomotive "Alabama," that weighed all of 12 tons, was dismantled and hauled over the Mountain where it was reassembled as were the needed cars. This idea worked and the track was laid beside the Ringgold depot and into Chattanooga. Surely, the "Alabama" and its short train of flat cars made many trips past Ringgold while the depot was being built, to deliver 18-foot long, flange-bar iron rails and wood stringers to the point of track construction.

On December 1, 1849, the locomotive "Alabama" and a train of small flat cars, with people aboard, arrived in Chattanooga from Tunnel Hill, whereupon it began to make roundtrips

each day but Sunday between those points in order to satisfy the Tennessee charter. Anything shipped on a train from either direction had to be hauled over the Mountain and reloaded into another train on the other side. Finally, on May 9, 1850, the first through train ran the 138 miles from Atlanta to Chattanooga. Then, Ringgold citizens could, for the first time ever, arrive in Atlanta on the same day they left Ringgold! For $3.48, your ancestors could depart at 8:40 in the morning and arrive in Atlanta at 4:00 p.m. The speed of the trains was about 15 miles per hour, and that was revolutionarily fast as it is four times faster than walking or riding in a wagon. The trains could have gone faster but it was bad for the track and could cause a train wreck.

When the railroad was completed, the W&A had 13 locomotives, each named in the manner that ships were named. The locomotives all burned wood for fuel and the W&A paid farmers to cut the trees and split the wood. The wood was then cut to a given length so that it would fit inside the locomotive's firebox. Larger locomotives needed longer pieces of wood. Once cut to size, the wood was stored in one of 12 large wood stations spaced out along the line. The railroad built elevated water tanks to supply water for the engines. The W&A had contracted water wells at each water tank location and pumps were used to raise the water into the tank. The nearest water tank to Ringgold, to the north, was six miles away at what was first called Opelika, then in 1854, renamed Johnson, and then after the war, renamed Graysville. The nearest water tank to the south was about three miles away at what the Railroad called Greenwood. To supply the needed railroad cars, the State owned the railroad so the solution was for the state penitentiary in Milledgeville to build railroad cars with prison labor. Each freight car could carry 8 tons of freight. These 33-foot-long freight cars were, in my opinion, painted a reddish-brown with white lettering and numbers. All of the cars in any train were connected together with what was known as link and pin couplers. The passenger cars, built by the prisoners, were about 50 feet long, and painted a light shade of yellow. For locomotives, they were purchased as the railroad could afford them from builders in New Jersey who would ship them by schooner to Savannah as there were no railroads between those points.

The W&A brought several things to Ringgold beyond a faster way to travel or ship commodities, one was a faster delivery of the U.S. Mail to Ringgold. A second feature was an express shipment service for gold or silver coins or legal documents. Another service provided was the telegraph and that occurred here in late 1851 or early 1852. It was part of a telegraph line that was set up along the W&A by the Augusta, Atlanta & Nashville Telegraph Company.

Two wires, each made of iron, were attached to cedar trees that had had the limbs cut off and had been set in place to hold the wires near the track. The top wire was for the railroad to use and the lower wire was for the telegraph company to use commercially. There were 12 telegraph stations along the line and Ringgold was the 10th station above Atlanta to have telegraph service. So, the first use of electricity in Ringgold was in this depot, in the form of battery-powered, telegraph transmissions in Morse code.

From the beginning, the theory and hope that the railroad would be busy was proven to be very true. All W&A trains operated on what was called "timetable authority" and that means the regularly scheduled trains had a stated time to be at a station as it traveled along. The timetable also stated where trains were to pass by one another at a side track. An additional train or trains could be run and they usually followed behind a scheduled train. If the scheduled train had a following train or trains, each locomotive with another train behind it carried a red flag on its cow catcher. The timetable and the red flags protected not just other trains but also the track workers. The railroad had 20 crews of track workers along this line that maintained their assigned section of about seven miles of track, when no train was scheduled to be where they were working. Each crew used a small, four-wheeled push car on the track to carry their tools and any crossties or rail they needed for their work. One crew of track workers lived about a mile to north of this depot in cottages on additional land purchased by the railroad. South of here, the next set of track worker cottages was about one mile this side of the Tunnel Hill depot.

It was the practice for the W&A, as with most railroads in the South, to assign an engineer and fireman to a particular locomotive for years at a time. The reason was that the crew would have the responsibility alone to take good care of the locomotive, when in operation. The engineer was in charge of the locomotive and was paid $3.00 a day. He was also in charge of the fireman who made $1.00 a day and the young man, called a wood passer, who made less than a dollar a day, that assisted the fireman when they took on firewood at the wood station and when moving down the track, handed the fireman pieces of wood to place in the firebox. The conductor was in charge of the entire train and its crew for which, a conductor on a passenger train was paid $2.00 a day. The conductor's train crewmen, called train hands, applied the hand brakes of the cars as that was how a train's speed was controlled or stopped. Those men were paid $1.00 a day. The train crews were personally known to the other train crews, track workers, the men at each depot, and the men at the wood and water stations as they saw each other six

days a week. This was when everyone worked 12 hours a day. Working six days a week, the train crews knew every inch of their railroad. They knew where the track was such that lost time could be made up with slightly faster running or where the track had a soft spot and they needed to slow down. Once the War broke out, the train crews, according to the payroll records, worked every day.

In 1855, the Superintendent of the W&A was able to begin to purchase large locomotives that weighed about 25 tons each and were calculated to have the ability to pull eight loaded boxcars at the constant track speed of about 15 miles an hour. If the cars were all empty, each of those locomotives could pull much more than eight cars. The W&A locomotives were painted every color but black. Locomotives wouldn't be painted predominately black until the 1880's. The color green was a common locomotive color. At least two W&A locomotives, one built in 1849, named Yonah, which is the Cherokee word for bear, and one built in 1856, named Texas were both painted predominately green. Light-blue was also a popular color and the locomotive named General came from the factory in 1855 painted light-blue. Both the Texas and the General, although they came from different builders, had the same sized engines to propel the driving wheels. As modern as these new locomotives were, at the time, none had speedometers, they would not be applied to locomotives until the 20th century.

All railroad's depots represented the nature of the business they handled at that location. If a depot had a large freight business, it had a large warehouse. Beginning about 1850, large farm wagons, loaded with farm produce, ready for shipment, and pulled by teams of horses would have pulled up to the doors along the west side of the warehouse. Please bear in mind that the ground on west side has been drastically altered. Grain such as corn, wheat, or oats would have brought here in cotton sacks, and each loaded sack weighed about 100 pounds. Bacon or lard would have probably been shipped in wooden boxes. Each sack, barrel, or box had the shipper's "brand" or owner's mark on it, so that the railroad agent could prepare a waybill to determine the tariff to be collected and for the receiver to recognize the shipment upon arrival. The land here was so fertile, between 1855 and the first half of 1856, the freight portion of this depot was enlarged to accommodate the outbound agricultural shipments. I believe the Ringgold depot and the depot at Tunnel Hill were originally the same size before 100 additional feet of warehouse was added on the north end for about $6,000. What I am about to tell you might give you an idea of why the additional space was necessary.

For the year ending September 30, 1859, farmers in the Ringgold area shipped over 41,000 bushels of corn, that would be over 2,000,000 pounds of corn that would have been in more than 20,000 loaded sacks. That weight of corn would have filled 125 of those 33-foot-long boxcars.

Ringgold farmers also shipped over 20,000 bushels of wheat, or 1,200,000 pounds of wheat in 12,000 sacks. That weight of wheat would have filled 75 boxcars.

Almost 175,000 pounds of bacon, lard or butter were shipped from this depot, that's over 87 tons of bacon or lard that would have filled 11 boxcars.

The agent here also shipped, 2,958 bushels of oats, 150 barrels of flour, almost 22,000 sacks of flour, 280 cattle or horses, and 2,280 hogs.

For those cattle, horses, or hogs, the railroad had a stock pen to hold the livestock until a stock car could be placed for loading and I feel it was to the north of the depot along the side track down the way. I feel that most everything was shipped south as cotton farmers below Atlanta found it more profitable to plant cotton and buy food rather that grow their own food.

All of what I just mentioned was the outbound freight shipments. To list everything that arrived and passed through the depot would just take too long. It would have been not only all the hardware and tools needed to build Ringgold, but everything that could not be made, grown or raised here. Simply put, the State-owned, Western & Atlantic Railroad was the only artery that provided transportation of commerce to Ringgold.

The railroad property here also had a small turntable for turning locomotives. It was reported to have been 30 feet long. It was installed in 1855 and had rotted away by 1870. I think that a freight train, called a "way freight," with an older, small locomotive could have left Dalton every morning during the shipping season to pick up loaded cars at Tunnel Hill and Ringgold and left empty cars to be loaded, then returned to Dalton with the loaded cars. It might have repeated that process several times during the day. The turntable here could have been used to turn the locomotive around for each trip back to Dalton with the loaded cars so that a full train could then be operated to Atlanta. I don't know that for certain, but it is the most plausible reason for a turntable to have been placed here and it was probably to the north of this depot. Another thing I want to point out is that the track just outside the building was where the original track was located. At some point, that track became the side track with the main line to the east of it.

Also in 1859, a network of trunk line railroads had been completed in the South that

provided a basic network of connecting lines to Washington D.C. or New Orleans via Cleveland or Chattanooga, Tennessee.

When the South seceded, the W&A was at its zenith. In the Spring and Summer of 1861, many thousands of soldiers from Georgia and Alabama rode through here, on the cars, enroute to Virginia. This did not go unnoticed to the Union sympathizers that lived in East Tennessee. Those people set about a plan to cripple the railroad's ability to move trains that supported South's war effort by burning railroad bridges. Back on February 1, 1855, the 1,800-foot long, wooden W&A bridge over the Etowah River had been destroyed by an accidental fire. It took three months to rebuild the structure. A wagon bridge was built that served to get people and goods across the River from one train to another while the bridge was being rebuilt, but, that entailed going down and then climbing up the steep banks of the River. The lack of a railroad bridge there was a great hinderance as you can image. On the evening of November 9, 1861, bridge burners destroyed two W&A bridges north of here over South Chickamauga Creek. It took almost four months for those two W&A bridges to be rebuilt. Now, let me say a word about the W&A's bridges. They were built with large wooden frame members that used iron rods to bind them together. They also had some type of covering over the bare timbers to prevent them from decay. There were 17 wooden bridges below Ringgold and that included the three long bridges over three rivers, namely the Chattahoochee, Etowah, and the Oostanaula River. Above Ringgold, there were eight wooden bridges, most of them were at least 200 feet long. The major bridges on the W&A had always been protected by a resident that lived nearby, and was paid by the railroad to walk over the bridge after each train passed and look for a smoldering timber. Tubs of water were positioned along each bridge with buckets to extinguish any embers that might have fallen from the locomotive. During the War, based on what we can determine, the bridges did, at times, have armed guards. Guarded or not, the loss of a bridge would have been disruptive to the W&A.

Let me close by observing that while Ringgold's depot is no longer filled with harvests, it will forever be filled with History. <u>This depot marks the time</u>. Atlanta doesn't have its depository building from its founding days aren't we fortunate today to have what was Ringgold's portal to the world beyond that began 173 years ago. I do look forward to what will be done on the 175th anniversary of this building.

Sources.

Documents contained within the Georgia State Archives, Morrow, Georgia.

Documents contain within the Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia

New York Public Library, digital collections

Newspaper articles contained within:

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Sixty years of attempting to learn everything about the Western & Atlantic Railroad