



CHRONICLES OF ST. MARY'S

Monthly Bulletin of the St. Mary's County Historical Society

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Volume 10

August 1962

No. 8

THE SOUTHERN MARYLAND RAILROAD

By General Robert Hogaboom, USMC (Ret)

The years immediately following the close of the Civil War ushered in an explosive boom in the expansion of the great American railway system. The romance, adventure and high finance of railroading were building up to peaks of wild excitement. By 1868 the Union Pacific from the East was closing the gap to the westward to meet the Central Pacific from the West. This herculean track-laying race ended the following year on May 10 when Leland Stanford drove the celebrated golden spike and linked the Far West to the whole United States.

It was in the great rail-laying year of 1868 that a ripple on the vast tidal wave of railroad expansion came to Southern Maryland. And while this ripple was not of such world shaking importance as the joining of the inter-continental rails it was an event of particular interest and promising import to St. Mary's County. In that year, by an act of the Maryland Legislature, the Southern Railroad Company was incorporated.

This railroad was designed to extend from Point Lookout, the southern most tip of St. Mary's County, to Washington, D. C., where it was to connect with the Pennsylvania Road, the Baltimore & Ohio Road and with the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. This Southern Maryland Railroad would thus connect the deepwater ports of the lower Chesapeake with the whole rail system of the country and particularly with the coal fields of western Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania. The project envisioned extensive wharves, and docking and rail facilities at St. Mary's City on the St. Mary's River and at Cornfield Harbor near Point Lookout on the Potomac. A spur was also to connect with docks at Drum Point on the Patuxent.

The total length of the railroad was to be 77.01 miles. Its location was designed to conform closely to the dividing ridge between the waters of the Potomac River and the Patuxent. In other words it would generally follow what is now Maryland Route 5 from Point Lookout to Ridge, then along Three Notch Road (Route 235) to Mechanicsville, thence again along Route 5 through Charlotte Hall and on to Hughesville where it would cut north through Charles County and into Prince Georges County joining with the Pope's Creek Branch of the Baltimore and Potomac (Pennsylvania) at Brandywine, and thence on across the Anacostia River into Washington.

The proposed road was surveyed the same year of the granting of the charter, in 1868, and work on the road was begun. This, of course, was long before the era of the bulldozer. Men, horses, mules, oxen, scrapers, wheelbarrow, and pick and shovel moved the earth. But progress was slow. Unlike the trans-continental rail-laying race between the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific where on one record day ten miles of rail were laid, the Southern Maryland Railroad Company was somewhat more deliberate.

By 1881, thirteen years after the original survey and after the expenditure of some \$500,000, only 45.8 miles of road bed had been graded and very little had been done in the way of laying rails.

To advance the construction of the road, and to raise additional funds, a very impressive Prospectus was published in 1881. This Prospectus described the work already accomplished and at considerable length recited the tremendous advantages to be derived from the completion of the Southern Maryland Railroad. The splendid qualities of Cornfield Harbor were elaborated on and the beauty and utility of St. Mary's Harbor were set forth in glowing detail. St. Mary's Harbor was described as, "one of the safest and most capacious harbors on the Atlantic Coast." It is,

"completely sheltered from storms and includes a water area greater than that part of New 285.

York Harbor from Hoboken, past Jersey City, Governor's Island, and Brooklyn." It "possesses great advantages over the ports of Washington and Baltimore."

This Prospectus of 1881 stated that large quantities of vegetables, fish, oysters and crab would be rapidly transported to the large markets of Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia. It noted that heavy ice conditions in 1880-81 had resulted in great loss of shipping to the ports of Washington and Baltimore. Prior to that in the winter of 1878-79 "for over one month six hundred sail of coasting and bay-trading vessels and over twenty large foreign steamers and ships, besides a very large fleet of oyster pungies, were firmly ice-bound in the Patuxent and lower estuaries of the Potomac. Among these vessels were many coal droghers bound to Alexandria, Washington, and Baltimore". The Prospectus did not fail to show the great advantages of St. Mary's Harbor as an ice-free port.

Then the Prospectus pointed out the great beauties of Point Lookout as a vacation place. Prior to the Civil War, Point Lookout had been a popular and fashionable watering place with a good hotel and a number of cottages all of which were destroyed or sold after the war. It was predicted that the hotel and cottages would be replaced by better ones and with the Southern Maryland Road providing easy, safe, and cheap daily access to it, Point Lookout could scarcely fail to become one of our greatest summer resorts.

But even more important to the Southern Maryland Railroad would be the shipment of coal. Particular emphasis was placed on the possible use of St. Mary's Harbor as a Naval depot and coaling station. According to the Prospectus, "In December 1816, Captain David Porter, then a member of the Board of Navy Commissioners reported to the Secretary of War in reference to St. Mary's Harbor as follows: 'In point of healthiness of situation, security from maritime attack, and I am informed) from ice, excellence of harbor, and easy ingress and egress to an inner harbor at all times to ships drawing not more than 24 1/2 feet of water, the advantages it offers by means of streams of water for labor-saving purposes, and its convenience to forests of pine timber, St. Mary's is, in my opinion, superior to any place, of which I have a knowledge, on the Chesapeake for a naval depot.' " Commodore John Rogers, a member of the same board is quoted as saying, "This river (St. Mary's), where it is perfectly susceptible of defence against a naval force, presents in several respects the most seducing reasons for its selection as a naval depot and rendezvous." Further, the Prospectus states, "In December, 1874, a board of naval officers, appointed under a resolution of Congress, reported on the expediency of establishing a naval coaling station at St. Mary's harbor." And finally Commodore Foxhall A. Parker, U.S.N., who commanded the gun-boat flotilla on the Potomac in 1864-65, is quoted, "There could be no better place for a coal depot than St. Mary's River, and exactly where I had mine during the Civil War - easy of access day and night, plenty of water and always as smooth as a mill-pond."

It is quite clear then that the Southern Maryland Railroad Company had great expectations of providing rail service for a naval depot and coaling station. As fortune would have it, however, a period of sixty-one years would intervene, as we shall see, before this projected railroad would finally reach a salt water port and serve a Naval Station.

In all justice it must be said that this Prospectus of 1881 makes good and exciting reading to this day. Its description of the scenic beauty, the natural resources, and the commercial advantages to be made available by the completion of the railway into St. Mary's County, while no doubt well founded, would do great justice to a modern day Madison Avenuer. To paraphrase a line from the poet Robert Frost, this Prospectus "more than half convinces me, I am half inclined to say." However, in spite of the splendid case it made for the promising Southern Maryland Railroad, in its execution it fell far short of its aim. The Company defaulted in 1882 with the railway completed only from Washington to Mechanicsville.

The first operating company was dead but the concept lived on. The romance and appeal of railroading were still vital. The old company was bought out in 1886 for \$75,000 and was reorganized under the new name of the Washington and Potomac Railroad Company with W. L. Thompson as general manager. Operating under contract to C. H. Green the road was in business for but three years. Unable to pay expenses Green surrendered his contract when it expired in 1889.

Through the years there followed a succession of reorganizations and failures. But the appeal and the hope of success did not die. A new company obtained the line in 1889 for \$100,000. In 1901 the name of the line was changed to Washington, Potomac, and Chesapeake Railroad Company.

In 1910 a new company under Henry Watson of Philadelphia as president and W. W. Early as general manager undertook operations. Again the road failed, service was suspended and the charter was dissolved in 1917. No further southward extension of the road beyond Mechanicsville yet had been made.

Renewed effort to reorganize the road and interest new capital failed. Interest and hope seemed to be at an end. However, when the railroad was sold to a junk dealer who began to remove the track for scrap a wave of new interest was quickly generated, particularly among the local citizens of St. Mary's and Charles Counties. When they saw the rails being removed many farmers and merchants became alarmed. Joining together and working largely through the efforts of W.B. Duke of St. Mary's County, an injunction was obtained to halt the removal of the remainder of the track.

Beginning then in 1918 the railroad, reorganized under the new name of Washington, Brandywine, and Point Lookout Railroad, became strictly a local venture. Negotiations with the junk dealer culminated in an agreement to purchase the property for the sum of \$130,000. The new company negotiated a loan and sold stock to the farmers and businessmen of the area. Under all previous organizations of the road the officers, directors and many of the chief employees had been outsiders. Under the new reorganization of 1918 the directorate was composed entirely of local residents. J. W. Muessen of Prince Georges County was appointed general manager and in 1924 he was succeeded by W. F. Chesley of St. Mary's County.

This new management of the railroad as a business venture was unique. The concept was that the road would be operated strictly as a public service with profits being incidental. The employees were mostly from the communities served. Passenger and freight services were combined and but two round trips were scheduled per week. Operating costs were thus held very low and the employees were free to devote the other four working days of the week to their farms and oyster beds or to other pursuits. A few of the employees were volunteers who served without pay on scheduled train days for a few hours as station agents. Passenger service was quite good and paid well until about 1925 when, with good roads coming in, it began to fall off, and passenger service was finally discontinued in 1928.

The disaster at Pearl Harbor and our precipitation into World War II rang up the curtain on a new act in the drama of Southern Maryland railroad history. After remaining in the wings unseen and forgotten for more than half a century the Navy at long last rushed onto the stage to take over the leading role.

In 1942 the Navy in building up to meet its wartime commitments decided to build its Air Test Center at Cedar Point on the Patuxent. This was just the point where the old Prospectus of 1881 had planned a spur to serve Drum Harbor. The Navy quickly negotiated with the owners of the railroad for its sale and on 1 June 1942 took over operations.

Under Navy ownership the name of the road became U. S. Government Railroad, Brandywine to Patuxent River Naval Air Station (Brandywine, Patuxent, and Mattipany). Contracts were immediately let not only to rehabilitate the line from Brandywine to Mechanicsville but also to extend the still uncompleted section of the line south from Mechanicsville to the Naval Air Test Center at Cedar Point.

At this date the Navy continues in possession of the line which is used on a non-schedule basis for the transportation of special and bulk type cargoes.

Thus this story of Southern Maryland railroading which began several generations ago with its visions of serving not only the trade, commerce, fisheries and agriculture of St. Mary's and her adjoining sister counties, but also the needs of a coal-burning Navy of sail and steam engine, ends with its rail service to a Navy of atomic engines, jet propelled aircraft and ballistic missiles.

The dream of linking the nation by rail to great deep-water ports at St. Mary's City and Cornfield Harbor remains unrealized and has long since faded away.

Note: The author of this paper is indebted for assistance to the following:

1. St. Mary's County Library personnel who helped locate a few important threads of information.
2. Captain James E. Vose, Jr., USN, who made available all source material at the Naval Air Base.
3. Mr. George F. Dederer, Jr. of Tall Timbers who had prepared a small brochure on this subject some years ago.
4. Mr. Charles E. Fenwick, our Historical Society President, who provided a copy of the 1881 Prospectus and who did not fail to keep a fire lit under the author until the paper was finished.

Footnote: Archcologists have learned that the location of ancient works of man is greatly facilitated through the study of aerial photographs. Through this method the author accidentally became interested in the Southern Maryland Railroad. Two years ago the author purchased a small farm at St. Mary's City and as a matter of general interest acquired an aerial photograph of the St. Mary's City area. An examination of this photograph showed an unusual topographic feature, a gentle curve that began at the shore of St. Mary's River near the mouth of Key's Branch, ran eastward to the Rosecroft Road then curving gently toward the northeast it followed the Rosecroft Road for about 100 yards, crossed Route 5 at right angles just south of Mattapany Street, then curving on toward the northward it disappeared off the photograph to the eastward of St. Mary's City. Inquiry and inspection of the ground conclusively prove this trace to be part of the old Southern Maryland Railroad bed graded, but never completed, nearly a century ago. Traces of the old wharf at the rivers edge still remain.

SOUTHERN MARYLAND RAILROAD COMPANY

As organized in 1881

Officers	J. H. Linville, Philadelphia, Pa.	President
	B. F. Folsom, Philadelphia, Pa.	Treasurer
	M. H. Hoffman, Philadelphia, Pa.	Secretary
Directors	J. H. Linville, Philadelphia, Pa.	
	B. F. Folsom, Philadelphia, Pa.	
	M. H. Hoffman, Philadelphia, Pa.	
	Wm. P. Henzey, (Baldwin Locomotive Works), Philadelphia, Pa.	
	Thomas T. Butcher, Philadelphia, Pa.	
	Hon. George H. Fairman, Philadelphia, Pa.	
	Gen. D. B. McKibbin, U.S.A., Philadelphia, Pa.	
	Joseph Trimble, Philadelphia, Pa.	
	Wm. H. Lafferty, Camden, N. J.	
	Charles E. Coates, Baltimore, Md.	
Engineer	Commodore W. W. W. Wood, Ch. Engr., USN, Washington, D. C.	
	John M. Broom, St. Mary's City, -Md.	

Editor's Notes

The evaluation of the St. Mary's River as a harbor, by Captain David Porter, Commodore John Rogers and Commodore Foxhall A. Parker is in accord with the evaluation of Father Andrew White, S.J., when he first entered the river in 1634. Commodore Parker had his depot at Cornwaley's Cross Manor and this story will appear in the September Chronicles.

