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THE RICHMOND, FREDERICKSBURG
AND POTOMAC RAILROAD
DURING THE WAR BETWEEN THE
STATES
BY
GRAYSON LEWIS NICKEL, JR.

THE RICHMOND, FREDERICKSBURG AND POTOMAC RAILROAD
DURING THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES

Submitted as an essay
of original research
for

American History Seminar
1934-1935

By:

Grayson Lewis Nickel, Jr.

THE RICHMOND, FREDERICKSBURG AND POTOMAC RAILROAD
DURING THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES.

The Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad has perhaps had one of the most interesting histories of any railroad in the United States. It came into being in February, 1834, with the opening of the books to receive subscriptions to stock under a charter issued by the State of Virginia. It is very interesting to note a news item at the time, it states: "It is now a matter of fact that this railroad and actively prosecuted. We understand that it is expected to be located during the present summer and fall; that about 30 miles will probably be put under contract in November or December and that in January the contractors will probably begin. It is believed the road will be executed from Richmond to Fredericksburg in the course of three years and the trip may then be made from Washington in eight hours. Much benefit is expected to our City from the great number of passengers who will then constantly pass through it and the additional quantity of produce which will come upon the railroad. A very favorable

opinion seems now to be entertained of the stocks as
a good investment."¹

The first meeting of the stock holders was held June 20th, 1865, in the City of Richmond. They elected John A. Lancaster, the first president, and chose as directors Conway Robinson, Nicholas Mills, James Boshier, Joseph M. Sheppard and Richard Haxall. The president and the board of directors at their first meeting appointed Moncure Robinson Chief Engineer. The first train to ever leave the City of Richmond, left on February 13th, 1836.² A very good description of this occasion is giving by a local newspaper at that time. It says;

The managers of The Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad opened twenty miles of it, which is just completed, and invited the Governor and Council, Judges of several courts, Mayor and Alderman of the City, and Legislature and other individuals as they thought proper. Six handsome passenger cars and a baggage car set out from the depot at the corner of Eighth and H (Broad) Streets and were drawn up H Street in a striking procession by the locomotive, a splendid steamer built in Liverpool for \$6,000.

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1. Duke, Jane Taylor, "One Hundred Years of the R. F. & P. R.R. Co.," quoting, Richmond Inquirer, June 17, 1834.
 2. Ibid.

Flags were flying and there was a band of music. A company of about one hundred and fifty persons assembled and embarked on board the cars about 11:00 o'clock A.M., and proceeded in fine style amidst the shouts and applause of an admiring and (in part) an amazed multitude. 3.

By January, 1837, the line had been completed as far north as Fredericksburg, a distance of 61 miles. From this point a line of stages made connection with the line of steamboats to Washington via the Potomac River. This line of steamers were the ones captured later by the Union Forces.

In 1842, the line was extended to Aquia Creek, which made the line 75 miles in length. "The track at this time was laid with strap rails, weighing twelve pounds per yard, spiked down to wooden stringers, and costing from \$60.00 to \$70.00 per ton."⁴

In 1860, Mr. Peter V. Daniel, Jr., was elected President of the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad Company. Soon after the beginning and during his

3. Ibid., quoting Diary of Blair Bolling, Esq.

4. Duke, "One Hundred Years!"

Term of office the War Between the States occurred. During this period much property was destroyed and the company disorganized. Because of its strategic position the R. F. and P. Railroad was the center of military operations. The railroad throughout the war continually changed hands from Union to Confederate and vice versa.

We first hear of the railroad and its connection with the War by its carrying delegates to the Virginia State Legislature to vote on whether Virginia should secede from the Union. Boys would stand around the stations when the trains stopped to see the delegates and praise or ridicule them.⁵

Many troops were carried over the R. F. and P. during the war. General Jo Lane Stern in his reminiscences tells of a troop train coming through his home town. He says: "The first company, outside of Caroline that I ever saw was the Purcell Battery, from Richmond. It was commanded by Captain, afterwards, General

5. Stern, Jo Lane, Personal Reminiscences 1861-1871.

Lindsay Walker. It was sent a day or two after Virginia seceded, to Aquia Creek on a special train which stopped at our depot, then called Chesterfield, and as it remained there sometime, I had an opportunity to satisfy my boyish curiosity by going through the train and looking at the strange soldiers with their red shirts and black trousers, and then looking at the little three inch muzzle loaders, which struck me as being very large guns"⁶

One of the first things the R. F. and P Railroad did to aid in the War was to put a telegraph line along its road. "Before the War the telegraph line from Richmond to Fredericksburg and beyond, ran along the county road known as the Telegraph Road, and there was no line on the Railroad."⁷ This line was moved over to the Railroad and many telegraph offices opened, one of which was at the station Chesterfield.⁸

The first thing that the Union forces did to the Railroad in an effort to cripple it

6. Ibid., 3-4

7. Ibid., 7

8. Ibid., 8

was to seize the Steamboats on the Potomac River, as we find in the report of the President to the stockholders. It states: "On the 19th of April 1861 the four steamboats of the Potomac Steamboat Company were seized by the United States Government at Washington and appropriated to its own uses as transports and armed war vessels."⁹ Thrice the president tried to get some compensation for these boats but failed. "This occurrence, and the existing war, discounting all the revenue usually derived by this company from travel to and from points north of Aquia Creek will of course considerably diminish, during the continuance of the war, the resources of the company!"¹⁰ Some compensation for this loss was hoped for as a result of the increased freight business as a result of the interruption of the travel between northern cities of the river trade.

The viewpoint of the President at that time probably expresses the viewpoint of the railroad in general at that time. He says in concluding his report: And whatever sacrifices of

9. Biennial Report of the Board of Public Works to the General Assembly of Va., 1859-60 1860-61, p.215.

10. Ibid.

profit or convenience we may be called up to incur either as a company or as citizens, it is not doubted that they will be cheerfully borne as the price of the independence and the welfare of our country, and of ~~the~~ future peace and prosperity."¹¹

Some of the characteristics of the road at this time will perhaps give you the value of the road to either army.

Length of the main line- Richmond to Aquia Creek- 75 miles.

Length of branches laid-- $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles (owned by New York and Richmond Coal Co.)

12

Number of engines 11

On the 27th of June 1861 Peter W. Daniel president of the R. F. and P. proposed a plan to build a line which would connect Weldon and the Potomac frontier with the cities of Richmond and Petersburg. This was suggested as a means of defense and as a result of the seizure of the steamboats on the Potomac. This work was to cost approximately \$75,000. In a letter to President Davis he outlined the reasons for requesting government aid because of lack of funds by the

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13
Company.

During the year 1861 the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad suffered nothing from destruction by either the Union or Confederate forces, as we see from the report of that year. It says: "No accidents from the War. Only running off track of regular freight train. Broke up cars, no persons injured."¹⁴

In 1862 the War had progressed much farther and the railroad had become more important in its campaigns and as an object of capture by both armies. The presence of the army induced an unusual amount of travel and trade especially at the northern extremity of the line.

Many trains passed over the road carrying the sick and wounded soldiers to the hospitals in Richmond. These trains were in constant danger of being captured or destroyed because the Union forces were continually making raids along the railroad. A very interesting incident is told by Gen. Jo Lene, he says; Avey (the other operator) took the up train to go

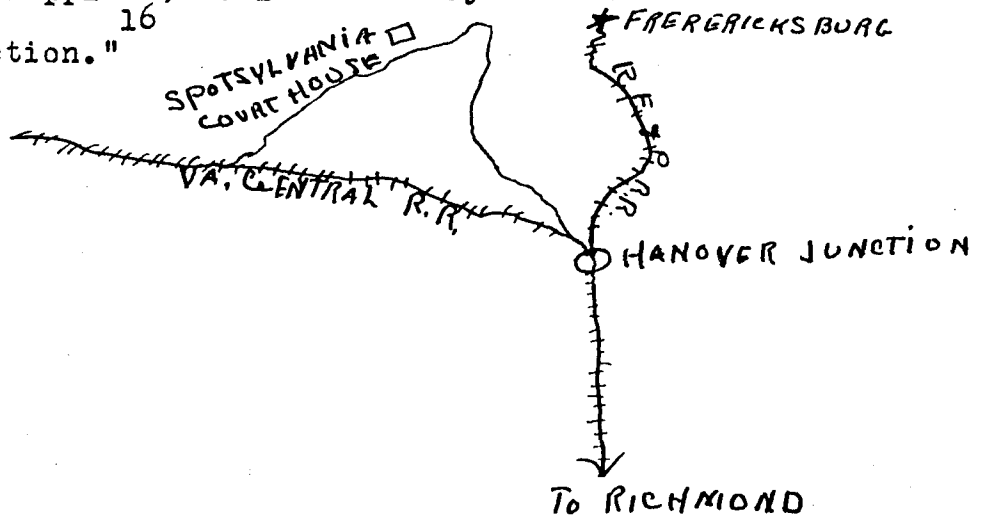
13. Letter by P. V. S. to Pres. Jefferson Davis, 1861, in Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, Series IV, Vol. I, 405-406.

14. Op. cit. Report.

to see some of the other operators up the road at Milford, or Guineys, or perhaps Hamilton's Crossing. While he was gone a Yankee Calvary raid cut the wires between Hanover Junction and Richmond on the Central Railroad, and it was important to find out the whereabouts of the raiders, whether they had gone as far as the R. F. and P. Railroad east of the Junction, because the train with sick and wounded soldiers was stopped at Milford by news that the Yankees were between that point and Richmond. It was decided to run the train down to the Junction, and if everything was clear get in Richmond, but it was not known what direction the Yankees would go, and so the conductor of the train had to feel his way along very carefully. " The train finally got through without any trouble. ¹⁵

Probably the most important point along the railroad was Hanover Junction. Its great importance and the struggle to hold it is expressed by Dr. Freeman in life of Lee. He says: " Besides, Spotsylvania was of strategic 15. Stern, Op. Cit.

importance, in the angle between the Richmond, Fredericks and Potomac and the Virginia Central Railroad. The place was an excellent approach to Hanover Junction where the two railroads met. An adversary seeking to drive the Army of Northern Virginia back on Richmond, by cutting off its supplies, would certainly strike for the junction."¹⁶



The approaches to Hanover Junction of the two Railroads.¹⁷

Soon after the spring campaign of 1862 opened the whole line of the R. F. and P. Railroad was abandoned and the telegraph offices at Fredericksburg dismantled and moved away.¹⁸

16. Freeman, Douglas S., R. E. Lee, Vol III, 299.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Stern, Op. Cit.

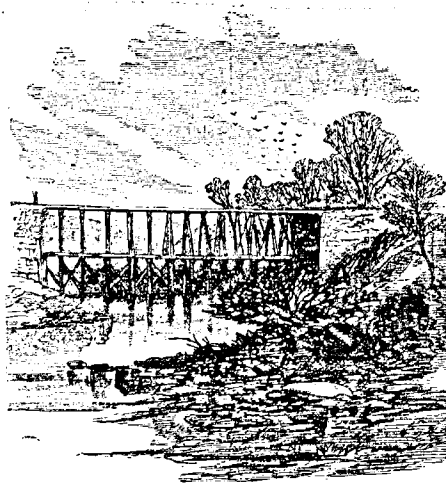
At that time the Railroads were under the control of the military authorities and very few civilians were allowed to ride on the trains because of the danger of capture by the enemy. Gen Stern tells of these conditions affecting his own family. he says: " my father and mother decided to refugee to Richmond. So we all went down to the railroad station to take the very last train going there. But lo and behold when we got to the depot the military rules were so strict that civilians would not be taken on the train and passage to Richmond was refused."¹⁹

Soon after the Railroad was abandoned a mile of track was this railroad was torn up and partially destroyed by the Confederate States as a war measure. The cost of rebuilding this part of the road was \$23,200. 92. Bridges between Fredericksburg and Richmond were also destroyed by the Confederate army "as a measure of public defence, except the bridge over the South Anna River, which was destroyed by the enemy."²⁰

19. Stern, Op. Cit.

20. Report of the Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the R. F. and P. Railroad, 1862.

In that year a large portion of the railroad was "in the actual occupation of the enemy, or exposed to their constant visitation."²¹



RF&P Bridge in 1862.—From an old print

General Stern tells of his experiences at the first battle of Fredericksburg and the important part played by the railroad there. He says: "After the fight at Fredericksburg, December 12th and 13th, a large part of our army moved back along the line of the railroad as far as Chesterfield Station and several battalions camped near there."²²

An extraordinary and unusual amount of transportation was required of this railroad by the Confederate Government at the end of 1862 and the beginning of 1863. In May, 1863 the

^{21.} *Ibid.*

^{22.} Stern, *Op. Cit.*

debts to the railroad by the Confederate States for transportation of freight and passengers amounted to \$193,312.98. The amount of money due to the railroad by the Confederate States for the expense of reconstruction of the line was \$23,422.67. In that year the railroad had invested in 8% Confederate States Bonds a sum of \$240,050.²³

In the spring of 1863 the second battle of Fredericksburg occurred and the soldiers used railroad material for defence purposes.

"The extreme right of the Confederate line was on the Railroad at Hamiltons Crossing. The soldierstore up railroad crossties and iron and made^a breastworks, using the material of the railroad for defense."²⁴

General Stern tells of his experiences during the battle: "During the progress of the fight we were very busy and hardly realized we were under fire. In the midst of the battle a company of artillery moved over the two bars of railroad iron which supported our one-story

23. Report, Op. Cit.

24. Stern, Op. Cit.

shanty, throwing the building in the air and wrecking it . After the battle , we received orders to put all the booty we could on hand-cars and shove them toward Guinea;

"We reached Guinea sometime during the night pretty well played out from pushing the hand cars up the Summit, from which place however they ran down to Guinea at a pretty good clip, and the little freight car which the railroad people had behind us , containing their plunder , overran our hand-cars and broke a large jar of "Substitute", which was the stuff used during the war in place of sulphuric acid."²⁵

At this time there were three brigades of calvary stationed along the R. F. and P. They were General Young at Hamiltons Crossing Gen. J. B. Jordan at Milford and Gen. Chambliss at Ashland. These brigades were held in readiness for use in the defense of Richmond if it was²⁶ necessary.

The Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad annual report to the stockholders

25. Stern, Op. Cit.

26. Ibid.

for the year 1863 has the following statement which indicates the part played by that road in the war up to that time: The Board feels that that it is no less just than gratifying to testify to the laborious zeal, fidelity and efficiency with which the officers and agents of the Company, especially in Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Hamiltons Crossing, have performed the duties devolved upon them, requiring labor and fatigue, sleepless vigilance and skill to a degree never before experienced by them, and rarely, if ever, exceeded in any other employment. Their conduct has given the most ~~important~~²⁷ aid to the government and armies of the country."

By the year 1864 the Railroad played only a small part in the campaigns of the war. Its chief work was the transporting of troops to the various battlefronts. In February 1864, Lee had to march Battles Brigade to the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad and transport ~~them~~ thence to Hanover Junction because ²⁸ the Virginia Central was not able to move them.

27. Reports. Op. Cit.

28. Freeman, Op. Cit.

The R. F. and P. ~~arr~~ as other railroads at this time was not able to take care of the needs of the armies in supplying either new men or food supplies. "Knowing that the railroads under the best possible management, could not be relied upon to bring a sufficiency of supplies to the army, Lee's second method of providing food for his men was through raids into western and southwestern Virginia."²⁹

Early in March, 1865, during Sheridan's Raid the four principal bridges of this railroad south of Fredericksburg and a train of 28 freight cars were destroyed by the military forces of the United States. Three of these bridges had been destroyed twice before during the war.³⁰ One ~~of~~ these bridges was one thousand feet long and another seven hundred and fifty feet, another four-hundred and quite a number between one and two hundred. These structures were made in Alexander and no duplicates could be gotten to replace them.³¹

An account of the destruction of one of the bridges and a raid is found in a local newspaper at the time. It states: "On Monday March 8, 1865 the Federals under the command of General

30. Reports. 1865.

31. Daily Dispatch, March, 14, 1865., Richmond, Va

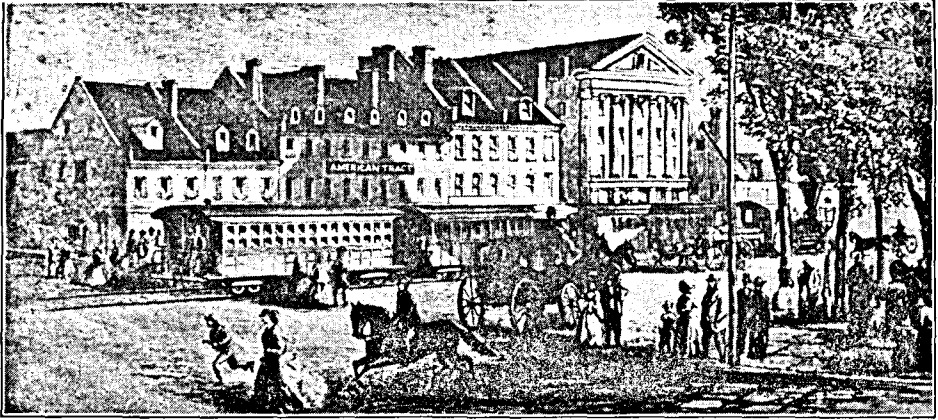
Hooker captured a quantity of tobacco stationed at Fredericksburg. After capturing the tobacco they destroyed the depot of the Richmond Fredericksburg Railroad as well as great quantities of rolling stock nearby. The railroad bridge in the rear of the city was also destroyed and a force went out some distance on the railroad destroying , culverts bridges and anything of any value to the railroad."³²

Operations of this railroad were nearly suspended, and the United States military authorities took over possession of the property of the road. About ten miles of track near Fredericksburg had been removed by the Confederate States authorities. In general, this railroad, "experienced great losses resulting from the desolation of war and the sudden destruction of the currency."³³ In November, 1865, this railroad recorded a loss of \$698,409.37 through Confederate States notes, bonds and open accounts, and \$70,043.40 through cost of rebuilding the line that was destroyed by the United States forces.³⁴

32. Ibid, Mch. 14, 1865.

33. Reports. 1865.

34. Ibid.



RF&P Train Leaving Eighth and Broad on October 14, 1865

After the war the railroad had to be re-
built which gave a great amount of work to idle
hands.

Finis.

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