Vision of a Railroad for Loudoun

By Paul McCray

Leesburg Station c. 1951 Courtesy NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection.

Contents:

Alexandria and Loudoun Seek a Railroad

When the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad was chartered in 1827 and then opened the first section in 1830, people across the Potomac River in Loudoun County, Virginia took notice. This innovative transportation technology changed trips from days to hours and helped farmers move their goods to markets quickly and with less spoilage.

Excited by the possibilities of a railroad, communities in Loudoun began petitioning the Commonwealth of Virginia for railroad charters. In 1832, a petition was issued asking for permission to build a railroad from the Town of Leesburg to Point of Rocks, Maryland. Two years later, a petition asked to charter a line from Upperville to run through Loudoun to Point of Rocks and in 1852 the Town of Waterford requested permission to build the Waterford and Potomac Railroad – ending at the same location on the river.[1] None of these plans were successful.

A petition issued in early 1847 by the city fathers in Alexandria for a line to Harpers Ferry was granted. That seaport city was losing business to Baltimore as the railroad was a faster and more reliable method of transportation than routes to Alexandria by road or the C&O Canal. Originally named The Alexandria and Potomac Railroad Company, the rail line petition would soon change the title to Alexandria and Harpers Ferry Railroad and the tracks would pass through Alexandria, Fairfax, and Loudoun.[2] A route was chosen which would follow the lower grades of the piedmont area and run along stream beds through more level countryside, an advantage which the proposed lines west of Leesburg did not have. The plan was to connect to the B&O Railroad in Harpers Ferry and serve the people and farm communities of Northern Virginia.

After the Winchester & Potomac Railroad connected to Harpers Ferry and the B&O in 1848, the Alexandria and Harpers Ferry Railroad gave up the plan to build in that direction and instead aimed for Paddytown (now Keyser) West Virginia. That new scheme also failed but the idea for a railroad from Alexandria stayed active and some of the same founders resurrected the plan in 1853 as the Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad (AL&H). Their sights were now set to the west on the rich coal fields of Hampshire County, West Virginia (but part of Virginia at the time.)

Financing soon proved to be a struggle even though the State of Virginia invested in three-fifths of the capital stock in the railroad. Clarke County, west of the mountains, subscribed to $100,000 in railroad stock hoping, as did the state, for an economic boom from the coming of the AL&H. Company officials also fanned out through the countryside along the route in Alexandria, Fairfax and Loudoun drumming up interest in the railroad to sell stock to farmers and business owners.

They had more success convincing landowners to donate right-of-way through their farms and properties for the railroad with the promise of new business and faster

---

[1] Multiple Petitions, *Legislative Petitions Digital Collection*. 2021. Library of Virginia. <https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/petitions>.

[2] ALH Railroad Petition, *Legislative Petitions Digital Collection*. 2021. Library of Virginia. <https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/petitions>.

transportation. Only a few balked at the trains coming through their land prompting the AL&H to use power of condemnation from Virginia to acquire the right-of-way needed for the tracks.

Due to constant financial struggles, grading of the line didn't reach Leesburg for three and half years. While the route took advantage of low areas and stream valleys such as Four Mile Run in Arlington and Piney Branch/Difficult Run in Fairfax, there was still quite a few rolling stretches of land which had to be flattened, especially in Loudoun. Hills had to be cut through to level the railbed then the excavated soil moved to the next low area or stream crossing so the grade could be built up and this was accomplished with almost no mechanical equipment.

At the same time, crews of stone workers were building the masonry needed to convey waterways under the railbed or, in the case of Clarkes Gap, a stone arch for the trains to pass under the Snickersville-Leesburg Turnpike – which crossed at a higher grade. Small streams could be handled with simple stone box culverts…flat stones set on end for the sides with a floor and roof of more flat stones. A few larger creeks had stone arches built over them and the largest waterways needed abutments and piers for bridges.

The rail line was typically 100-feet wide along most of the route with a few low areas needing more width for broader embankments. This would have been wide enough to fit dual tracks for trains operating in two directions, but the AL&H made the decision to build a single-track rail line. This was probably to save money on grading and more substantial bridges as well as the cost of rails and ties.

To allow two-way traffic to operate on the line, a series of side-tracks were built at strategic points to allow trains to pass one another in opposite directions. For this to work and to avoid collisions, train drivers had to know when to pull over to let another train pass. Since this was in the time before radio communications, the answer was to run on time schedules. Each train had a schedule for the day and the drivers could refer to it to know when to pull onto a side rail for a passing train. Every employee had a trainman's pocket watch with an interior lock to prevent it from being changed inadvertently. And to make sure everyone was synchronized; the railroad often employed a watch inspector who rode the line to inspect timepieces and set the time with his.[3]

For the railroad to be successful, stations had to be built close to their customers. The planners of the AL&H knew that people would only travel a certain distance to ride the rails and that farmers needed to have a depot close enough to be able to move their milk, crops, and livestock to trains in a timely manner. In Loudoun County, the AL&H initially built stations in Guilford (now Sterling), then four miles west at Farmwell (now Ashburn) and six further in Leesburg. Except for Leesburg, there weren't communities at those locations, but it wouldn't take long for people to move close to the depots. As

[3] William B. Emmert, 20 August 1917. Washington & Old Dominion Railway *Company Bulletin No. 208*. NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection.

the railroad was built further west and villages developed, more stations were established.

The original buildings were combination train stations with a passenger waiting area, stationmaster's office, and a freight room. Later, some of the busier towns such as Leesburg and Round Hill had freight and passenger areas in separate structures. A few smaller communities had simple three-sided shelters for passengers and platforms for farm goods.

The railroad began service to Farmwell (Ashburn) by February 16, 1860, and trains reached Leesburg on May 17th of that year. With a direct and speedy (two hours) connection to Alexandria, Loudoun and Leesburg saw a bright future of growth and prosperity and both towns were ready for new business opportunities.

By March 1861 business was so good, the railroad went from a single passenger train a day to two daily runs between Alexandria and Leesburg.[4] They were optimistic about continuing to grow both the passenger and freight business but events a month later derailed that hope. The progress made by the Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad came to an abrupt halt on April 17, 1861, when Virginia formally seceded from the Union.

The Civil War Comes to the Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad

Confederate leaders in Virginia, especially Major General Robert E. Lee, knew how valuable trains would be for the war effort and Lee wanted to move the railroad's locomotives south for safety. Since the AL&H tracks ended in Leesburg, consideration was given to connecting with the Orange & Alexandria on the east end and moving equipment south that way.

Before that could happen, Union troops moved across the Potomac on May 23, 1861, and took control of Alexandria. The next day, the morning AL&H train heading to Leesburg was stopped and seized by Union soldiers. The AL&H locomotive named the Clarke would run as a United State Military Railroad asset for the rest of the war on the Alexandria to Vienna section.[5]

Two locomotives were still in Leesburg as well as a variety of rail cars and while the cars could be easily replaced, the locomotives were a scarce commodity. Lee instructed Colonel Eppa Hunton to move them if possible and if not destroy them.

The Confederate Army's solution was to move the two locomotives by road to the Manassas Gap Railroad in Piedmont, now Delaplane. They had someone with experience to oversee this job, Captain Thomas R. Sharp, an acting Confederate quartermaster general. He came straight to Leesburg after completing the task of moving more than a dozen pieces of rail equipment from Martinsburg to Strasburg.

---

[4] Herbert H. Harwood, 2009. *Rails to the Blue Ridge*. Fairfax, VA: Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, Pg. 16.

[5] Bradley E. Germand, 2002*. A Virginia Village Goes to War: Falls Church During the Civil War.* Virginia Beach, VA.: The Donning Company Publishers, Pg 36.

Sharp, 27 years old, had worked as an engineer on southern railroads and was well acquainted with the mechanics of the equipment.

In Leesburg he had the locomotives taken off their wheels and everything loaded onto wagons to be hauled with horses, mules, and oxen. On August 2, 1861, they proceeded down the Carolina Road (now Route 15) but broke a chain going through Goose Creek. After repairs they were able to make it to Aldie and head west.[6]

Mrs. Ida Dulany, a resident of Aldie, wrote in her diary on August 9th "To-day we expect to hear news. Yesterday all the cars from Leesburg passed our gate drawn by oxen and mules. They were going to Piedmont for the use of the army, so we look for a speedy movement in the army."[7] Her diary entry didn't express much excitement from what must have been quite a spectacle for the people of Aldie.

On September 9th, the first engine arrived in Richmond, the Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad locomotive McKenzie, named after the president of the AL&H and was quickly renamed the General Beauregard. The second locomotive, the Manning, had been named after the chief engineer of the railroad and was renamed the General Johnston.[8] Both locomotives would operate for the Confederacy throughout the war.

The only real action on the railroad was on June 17, 1861, when a South Carolina infantry unit ambushed a U.S. Military train on the east side of Vienna. An artillery shell from the Confederate troops uncoupled the locomotive from the car it was pulling, prompting the engineer to speed back towards Alexandria. Assuming Union reinforcements would be on the way, the South Carolina infantry withdrew.

While most work extending the railroad beyond Leesburg stopped for the war, there is some evidence that construction continued. In his memoirs, J.F. Manning of Paeonian Springs wrote that in late 1862 or early 1863, his two older siblings died and workers building the nearby railroad bed helped bury them as their father was away riding with Mosby's Raiders.[9]

Confederate troops burned the six bridges on the line between Vienna and Leesburg so for most of the war the trains only ran as far as Vienna, transporting soldiers and supplies to the army camp in that town. The railroad also was a primary carrier of firewood to some of the Virginia forts protecting Washington and for use in the city.

---

[6] Thomas R.Sharp. July-August, 1861. *Diary of Thomas R. Sharp, Confederate Railroad Service*. The original of the diary is at the Virginia Tech University Library, Blacksburg, VA.
[7] Mrs. Ida Dulany, 9 August 1861*. Diary of Mrs. Ida Dulany*. Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, VA, Pg. 16.

[8] Harwood, Pg. 17.
[9] J.F. Manning, 4 August 1935. *Eudora Farm*. Unpublished Manuscript, Balch Library, Leesburg, VA.

Paeonian Springs c. 1900, Courtesy NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection.

Rebuilding the Railroad After the War

After the war, the Federal government considered the AL&H to be an enemy railroad since it was in Virginia and denied compensation for the locomotive and other equipment used and worn out by the U.S. Military Railroad. A claim for $5,743 to compensate for supplies given to the army in 1861 wasn't resolved until 1884 when Congress denied the request ruling "…the original owner who was loyal was long gone and they presumed the new owner not loyal."[10] The railroad was repaired and reopened using surplus supplies from the Union army with payment arranged through monthly installments.

Some positive developments came from the events of the war for the AL&H; the railroad now had connections into Washington and to rail lines to the south, which had not been possible before.[11]

To return to Leesburg, the railroad had to rebuild the bridges destroyed by the Confederate army and replace long sections of rails removed west of Vienna. Trains didn't return to Leesburg until June 1, 1867, and once there were greeted by a new stationmaster, 17-year-old Charles Albert English of Alexandria who was a neighbor of company president Lewis McKenzie. English must have been a good fit for his job as he stayed with the railroad in Leesburg for the next 51 years, working through six changes in ownership and management.

The rail line began moving ahead with extensions and improvements. Turntables were built in Herndon and Leesburg and a water tank was installed east of Leesburg at

[10] Ames W. Williams, 1989. *Washington & Old Dominion Railroad 1847-1968*. Arlington, VA: Arlington Historical Society, Pg. 28.
[11] Harwood, Pg. 17.

Tuscarora Creek to fill the steam locomotives.[12] Work on the line past Leesburg started again but went very slowly due to a constant lack of funds. Hamilton was finally reached in 1870 and Purcellville in 1874, with the rail line now under a new corporate name, the Washington & Ohio Railroad. The company now had plans to extend all the way to the Ohio River, a somewhat ambitious goal given the financial difficulties and slow pace of expansion the railroad had seen during its life.

The opening ceremony for the railroad reaching Purcellville was held on March 31, 1874, with three local bands playing festive music, President McKenzie of the Washington & Ohio Railroad presiding, area dignitaries giving speeches and most of the local residents in attendance. *The Mirror* newspaper in Leesburg reported that the coming of the railroad "set the little village aglow with life and activity." [13]

Round Hill was reached by the end of 1874 and turntable was put in place, possibly moved from Purcellville, so train locomotives could be turned around.[14]

One notable event of this era in the railroad's history occurred on November 27, 1873, when President Grant rode the Washington & Ohio Railroad to Leesburg, Virginia with his cabinet for an outing at an agricultural fair.[15] For the next four years the W&O languished, barely making enough to pay the costs of running the railroad. An obstacle to expanding the line was through the Blue Ridge Mountains, a task which proved to be impossible given the lack of profits and a lingering recession which was hurting all railroads. So, it was no surprise to anyone when the Washington & Ohio Railroad went into receivership in February 1878.

It took more than four years for a buyer to be found and the rail line became the Washington & Western Railroad in 1883. This time the goal was to extend the line to Cincinnati, Ohio but the company didn't even make their first bond payment of $400,000 and the railroad was sold again after only a year. The new company name became the somewhat vague Washington, Ohio & Western Railroad and for a good reason. The buyer was a financial group from New York whose main interest was flipping their investment to a larger railroad system for a quick profit.[16]

Their plan was realized in 1886 when the railroad was first leased and then purchased by a new group, the Richmond and Danville. They weren't interested in the WO&W for profit potential but to keep other railroad conglomerates from buying it and expanding into R&D territory. Previous ownership companies didn't have the financial resources to expand…the R&D could afford it but had no intention to extend the railroad past Round Hill.

The Richmond and Danville ownership group was gobbled up by another railroad conglomerate in 1894, the Southern Railway, and the WO&W Railroad went with it. The

[12] Williams, Pg. 26.
[13] "The Railroad to Purcellville." *The Mirror*, Leesburg VA, 1 April 1874. Pg. 2
[14] Ann Whitehead Thomas, 2004. *A Story of Round Hill*. Leesburg, VA: Friends of Balch Library Inc., Pg. 19.
[15] "President Grant and His Cabinet met at the Loudoun Fair." *Loudoun Mirror,* Leesburg, VA, 12 November 1873, Pg. 2.
[16] Harwood. Pg. 23.

Southern didn't have any illusions about the profitability of the line but had a pleasant surprise in spring of 1898 when a large Spanish American War training camp was located beside the tracks in the Dunn Loring area of Fairfax County.

By the summer of 1898, Camp Alger hosted 30,000 soldiers, mostly brought in via the Southern Railway. Horses, equipment, and supplies arrived on the railroad bringing a surge in revenue.

But by August the camp started to shut down as the infrastructure of the area could not handle that many men in healthy conditions. Disease such as typhoid and dysentery was rampant because fresh water was scare and toilet facilities primitive. Also since there were few buildings, food storage, cooking and dining were conducted out in the open – exposed to the sun and insects.

In 1900, the laws of segregation created a business problem for the Railroad. The National Guard encampment was to take place in the summer, but because cars were to be racially segregated as of July, first, General George H. Harries, commanding the militia of the District, cancelled the event. Attached to the District National Guard was the First Separate Battalion, colored, commanded by Major Arthur Brooks. The 200-man unit was the largest in the district. While interstate law forbade the enforcement of Jim Crow car regulation it would have been a problem for Black riding south of the state line. As a result, the encampment was moved to Gaithersburg, Maryland, about twenty miles outside of Washington, DC.[17]

Another significant occurrence during the Southern Railway ownership period came in 1900 when the people of the Snickersville area of western Loudoun expressed interest in having the rail line extended from Round Hill to their town. Snickersville was at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains and had several hotels and boarding houses which were popular with people looking for a cool, clean vacation spot. Weather in Washington during the summer could be hot and humid with coal and wood smoke from cooking and the city's industry – the air was often polluted.

Vacationing in western Loudoun became popular but to reach the mountains, stagecoaches and wagons had to be hired at the Round Hill Station, which was as far as the railroad ran. The Southern Railway was open to the idea of extending the line with some conditions:

"The Southern Railway Company having made a proposition to the citizens of Snickersville and vicinity, that if they will give the said Company right of way and money sufficient to construct a suitable depot, the Company will extend their road to Snickersville in the near future. The route has been located. All interested in said extension will please meet in Snickersville at 2 o'clock Saturday, April 7th, 1900."[18]

Besides the right-of-way and funding requirement, the Southern had one other condition – that the town change its name. The railway deemed "Snickersville" to not be attractive enough of a name to draw the numbers of train passengers they needed. This prompted a heated debate in the area between those wanting the increased

[17] "To Camp in Maryland." *The Washington Post*, Washington D.C., 15 June 1900, Pg. 9.
[18] "Southern Railway Meeting Flier." Snickersville, VA, April 1900.

income from more visitors and those wanting to keep the historic name of the town. In the end the name change advocates won and Bluemont was born.

New Owners Bring a New Technology to the Railroad

The next phase of the railroad's life began with the new technology of the electric trolley. Horse drawn trolleys had been a common sight in cities from before the Civil War but now a faster, more reliable mass transportation method was available with the increasing prevalence of electricity. Trolley lines were popping up around Washington D.C. and out to the surrounding areas. One group of twenty businessmen from Maryland and Virginia received a charter in January 1900 to build a trolley line from Georgetown to Great Falls on the Potomac and called it the Great Falls & Old Dominion Railway Company. After acquiring a few assets, the venture failed.

But in 1902, two wealthy and influential men purchased the company and began constructing the railroad to Great Falls. John R. McClean inherited the Cincinnati Enquirer from his father before moving to the District of Columbia to buy the Washington Post (and to give the newspaper a new reputation as a scandal sheet). He also became president of Washington Gaslight and a major shareholder in two local banks. He held the larger share of the Great Falls Railroad stock.[19]

His partner was Senator Stephen B. Elkins of West Virginia who was wealthy in his own right. With his father-in-law, he developed and owned large coal and lumber operations in his home state and built the West Virginia Central & Pittsburgh Railroad to handle their products. McLean and Elkins began construction on the Great Falls & Old Dominion Railroad (GF&OD) in 1903 and by July 4, 1906, were carrying passengers to the park they built at Great Falls.

Great Falls had been attracting visitors for a hundred years to see the majestic scene of the river with several 20-foot falls and a total drop in elevation of 76 feet. The Potomac River at that point narrows from over 1,000 feet to only 100 feet or less in width.[20]

McLean and Elkins added many amenities to the park at Great Falls including a depot, dining hall, merry-go-round, tent sites, a dance hall, and an ice cream parlor. The healthy air and nature of the rural area of Great Falls was marketed by the GF&OD with one advertisement touting "No Malaria." For government workers having the luxury of weekends off, this was a perfect way to spend their time and money.

The railroad was immediately overwhelmed by city dwellers looking for something to do on weekends. The number of cars was woefully insufficient for the crowds and electric trolleys were packed tight with people. Additional used equipment was quickly purchased but challenges continued. A collision occurred between two of the new cars on their first day of service, demolishing one and putting it out of service permanently.

[19] Harwood. Pg. 35.
[20] National Park Service. *Great Falls of the Potomac*. Website. <https://www.nps.gov/grfa/learn/nature/falls.htm>.

Another challenge was that while the line was planned as a two-track railroad allowing two-way traffic at any time, the developers focused on getting one track built in the rush to get open and the second wouldn't be ready until 1908. But even under those circumstances, the GF&OD was carrying 1.6 million passengers a year.[21]

With the railroad operating to Great Falls even during the week, people began moving into the countryside. Small communities popped up and open-sided passenger shelters were installed…some neighborhoods, such as McLean (named after the owner), grew large and featured stores and a post office.

With the success of the GF&OD under their belt, McLean and Elkins looked for other ventures and took a lease on the Southern Railroad's Bluemont Branch (nicknamed for the terminus in Bluemont). The parent company for the two rail lines became the Washington & Old Dominion Railway (W&OD).

One major improvement they made right away were to tie their two railroads together with a double track connecting line from the GF&OD to the Bluemont Branch in the Arlington area, which became known as Bluemont Junction.

Another change to the Bluemont Branch was to electrify it. It had been operating as a coal-fired steam locomotive line which was great for the freight business but not so comfortable for the passengers. With the windows down during the heat of the summer, hot and dirty coal smoke blew into the passenger cars. Also, with steam locomotives pulling passenger cars, it took longer for the trains to stop and start so the railroad had to limit the number of spots people could catch a ride. With the nimbler electric trolleys, more passenger stops could be made so the W&OD Railroad began building small shelters anywhere they knew people might want to be picked up. These were often call "Whistle or Flag Stops" as someone would step out to signal the trolley as it came by.

Labor Strife on the W&OD

"Until the union men understand that we are going to take care of ourselves, our situation will be bad." April 19, 1916, W&OD Railway General Manager William B. Emmert in a confidential letter to company General Counsel Francis T. Homer.[22]

The Washington & Old Dominion Railway had been in operation for less than four years when the Amalgamated Association of Street and Railroad Employees came to Washington to organize all the local trolley lines. The Amalgamated representative met with the W&OD employees at the Leesburg Inn on April 3, 1916, and signed many of them to the union, forming local 699. A list of demands was drawn up which included a 10-hour workday, a half cent per mile increase for passenger service employees and a raise for freight staff from $3 to $4 per day.

The management of the W&OD got wind of the union's activities and General Manager W.B. Emmert drew up a list of merits and demerits that could lead to bonuses or

[21] Harwood, Pg. 41.
[22] W&OD General Manager William B. Emmert, 19 April 1916. Memorandum to W&OD Attorney Francis T. Homer. NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection.

termination. Merits included "unusual loyalty to the Company's interests" while demerits listed "disobedience of orders, disloyalty and any conduct that renders service unsatisfactory."[23]

Emmert used this as a rationale to begin firing those employees who had joined the new union and, on April 7th, the men of the W&OD walked out. Union organizers waited until midday to call a strike when they knew commuters from the Virginia countryside were already at work. Hundreds of railroad patrons, including many Loudoun residents, were left stranded in the city. Some found alternate ways of reaching home when trucks, automobiles and farm wagons of all sorts were pressed into service to carry passengers home.

By the next day, W&OD operators had one car running, but only for mail, using office staff to make the run. This led to a bit of embarrassment for the company when, much to the amusement of the nearby striking employees, a manager somehow derailed a passenger train across two tracks in Rosslyn, removing any further chances of getting cars out that day.

The W&OD Railway was so effectively tied up that the company was forced to negotiate with the union representing the men. An agreement was signed on the evening of April 8th calling for the men to go back to work and resume operation of the line the next morning. It provided for a committee of employees to meet with company officials every afternoon for the next ten days to present their grievances and try to work out a solution.

Those talks went to the last hour. Just as the employees were preparing to go back on strike April 18th, the two sides signed another agreement that continued the talks for one year and included a plan for arbitration if differences "cannot be mutually adjusted in conference." This rather open-ended settlement would cause confusion among railroad workers unfamiliar with how unions negotiated and would lead to more troubles.

One of the problems facing the company was the lack of leadership among the owners. Stephen Elkins had died just as the W&OD Railway venture was starting. John McLean was in the final stages of cancer when labor problems broke out and couldn't participate in the negotiations. His son and the Elkins family were content to let railway management and attorneys handle the union.

When the company began stalling the process of arbitration, the employees called a strike without the authorization of the union and walked out on May 12th. National union head, Samuel Gompers, said that "by declaring a strike while arbitration was in process, the employees of the W&OD Railway Company have violated an agreement and unless they go back to work…their union, and I personally, will wash our hands of them and the whole affair."[24]

This time, the W&OD Railway was ready for the work stoppage. They'd lined up enough strike breakers to continue operations and hired detectives from the Baldwin

[23] Emmert, 1 March 1916. W&OD Railway *Company Bulletin No. 150*. NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection.

[24] "Organized Labor May Hit Strikers." *Evening Star*, Washington D.C., 13 May 1916, Pg. 4.

Agency to guard company property. Four years later, this detective agency would touch off a bloody round of violence and death when they were hired to evict miners from company housing in the West Virginia coal mining town of Matewan.
There was a bit of vandalism against the railroad. Railroad cars were tagged with graffiti, windows were broken and in the Vienna area, a four-car train from Bluemont ran into a cut or broken trolley wire, possibly damaged by strikers or strike sympathizers, or just damaged through neglect. The 600-volt line set fire to one car and was cited by the company as a reason they needed to protect the railroad.

Ashburn Station 1950, Herbert H. Harwood J. Photographer. Courtesy NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection.

The Baldwin detectives were dispatched to the towns along the W&OD to guard stations and patrol bridges. Complaints about the presence and activities of the detectives came both from law enforcement and citizens. A resident of Loudoun County wrote to the local paper that nothing had happened in his community of Ashburn that warranted the occupation of their town by the Baldwin men. "Our agent locked up his depot and quietly went home. Our section foreman simply transferred his labors from the railroad to his garden for he is a man of quiet disposition…Then Mr. Editor, what was our surprise when the Baldwin detectives began to flock into Ashburn like grasshoppers to a western wheat field. You can't throw a rock in Ashburn without hitting a Baldwin detective. The town is practically under martial law…We protest against being made to rub shoulders against these walking arsenals. Some of these fools might go off…Why send clear to

Bluefield, W.VA. and bring in a lot of leather legging, khaki clad bullies, with sixteen shot repeaters to guard us?"[25] In Round Hill however, the W&OD hired Town Sergeant Walter H. Howell and his assistant William R. Boley for $50 each to watch the depot and the nearby wooden trestle until the strike was over.[26]

The W&OD also offered a $5,000 reward for anyone providing evidence that led to the conviction of persons damaging the company's equipment. This reward was worth as much as $120,000 in 2020 dollars and was a steep price for a railway that claimed it couldn't afford to raise trolley worker's salaries by 1/2 cent per mile. The company likely never planned to pay the reward.

The end of the employee strike came swiftly. On May 17th, the men declared that they'd made a mistake in calling a strike while arbitration was ongoing and blamed it on a misunderstanding with their chosen arbitrator. Despite this admission, many of the union men were not hired back on the line and the railroad had troublesome relations with union employees for many years to come.

Ironically, the railway's sister union which represented other trolley lines in the area, local 689, today represents 7,600 employees of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. The Transit Authority operates both buses and the Metrorail line, serving some of the same area as did the W&OD.

Financial Woes as Passenger Service Declines

Not long after their labor troubles, the W&OD Railway began to see their revenue dropping. After John McLean died in 1916, the heirs to the railroad resisted investments in improvements and maintenance which hurt the operation. Passenger numbers declined and fell even further as automobiles gained in popularity. Cars were becoming faster and more reliable so people could travel and commute on their schedule rather than waiting for a train car – which was often late. More roads were being paved and new roads were being built to accommodate auto traffic. The result was a steady decrease in passenger fares after 1919.

The Great Depression affected the W&OD much as it did many businesses. For the W&OD Railway it meant fewer passengers commuting to work and less freight as people were unable to buy goods. Coupled with the lack of investment from owners, management looked to cut expenses any way they could. Passenger runs were cut back, and staffing was reduced to save money. Although the Elkins and McLean heirs declined to invest more money in the railroad, they did cover the deficits at a time when other railways were not surviving.[27]

But by 1932 the families stopped opening their bank accounts for the losses. The McLean family was dealing with many personal and financial problems, so they and the Elkins heirs let the railway fall into receivership. A longtime Southern Railway and

[25] "What's the Matter with Ashburn?" *Loudoun Mirror*, Leesburg, VA, 26 May 1916, Pg. 1
[26] Thomas Pg. 22.
[27] Harwood, Pg. 73.

W&OD employee, George Baggett, was appointed receiver, then general manager and by 1936 Vice President of the W&OD.[28] Primarily a freight man, he would work hard over the next few decades to make the W&OD successful.

The $60,000 a year rent the W&OD owed the Southern Railway wasn't being paid and hadn't for years. Taxes were owed to the three counties the Great Falls line and the Bluemont Branch ran through and the county governments were becoming impatient. The infrastructure for the electric cars and locomotives was old and failing but there was no money to replace it.

The W&OD Railway had always been loosely run, as many short line railroads were, and often did things not completely in line with railroading practices. As a teenager, Joseph Weyraugh of Arlington hung around the Bluemont Junction yard and endeared himself to the train workers. The rail workers allowed him to dig through the scrap pile at the yard salvaging locomotive builder plates and other relics for his collection. On one memorable occasion, he was allowed to operate the switching locomotive kept at the Junction for moving boxcars, a clear violation of railroading standards, but this was a memory Joseph recalled a half a century later with excitement in his voice.[29] Another young man, Frank Tosh, frequently visited the East Falls Church Depot helping the stationmaster when trains arrived. His favorite memory was when the stationmaster was ill and put Frank in charge while he went home.[30]

Baggett did what he could to stem the losses and cut the most obvious money losing businesses including many of the daily passenger runs and all passenger service between Bluemont Junction in Arlington and Alexandria. This section of the line which would become freight only. The railroad continued to lose money and by 1936 a more drastic measure was taken.

The Great Falls line had little freight or express service to prop it up and passenger fares had dwindled so it was time to get rid of that branch. It was shut down by 1934 and the track right-of-way for the GF&OD was turned over to Fairfax County to offset taxes owed to the county in 1936. Eventually Fairfax built a highway on the land, memorializing what it had been with the name Old Dominion Drive.

The railroad entered bankruptcy and reorganized that year as the Washington & Old Dominion Railroad (a change from Railway) with their debts either reduced or discharged, including loans which enabled the 1912 electrification. Davis Elkins bought out the McLean heirs to hold full ownership and now seemed to want the railroad to succeed. To make that happen though, more cuts had to be made.

The seven miles of the W&OD beyond Purcellville ran through an area of Loudoun County with only 600 residents and the railroad had experienced a drastic drop in passenger fares. The vacation industry in western Loudoun was essentially gone so what had been a lucrative source of income no longer existed. Worse for the railroad's

[28] "Railroad Man for 50 Years Says This Is No Time to Retire." *The Washington Post*. Washington D.C., 16 September 1951, M16.
[29] Joseph Weyraugh,1990. *W&OD Railroad*. Interview by Paul McCray.
[30] Frank Tosh, 2002. *W&OD.* Interview by Paul McCray.

bottom line was that the mills in Round Hill and Bluemont had shut down leaving that section with no major business customers. The final straw was when the long wooden trestle just before Round Hill needed replacement and there was no financial justification for that expense. George Baggett applied to the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1939 to abandon the seven miles and it was approved. Now Purcellville was the endpoint of the railroad.[31]

The next to go was the passenger service. It barely made any money and only the postal contract kept that business from dropping too deeply into the red. But the railroad had a fight on its hands as a small number of diehard commuters fought the abandonment of passenger service in court. One person, Nellie Fletcher of Leesburg, proclaimed that "Mothers will never see their children again."[32] Eventually the courts found there wasn't justification to continue passenger service so in April 1941 it was shut down. The W&OD still held the lucrative federal mail contract so that continued using a passenger car.

Baggett needed to take one more step in his attempt to make the W&OD solvent – find a way to deal with the deteriorating electric equipment. His answer was to remove the system entirely and replace it with self-propelled locomotives. There was the problem of how to pay for these new locomotives, but Baggett found a solution. In his own words "We were struck with a bright thought….Why not request the Southern (Railway) to lend us the down payment on the three diesels – with the understanding that we would turn over to them the copper and other materials forming part of the overhead electrical system, which they already own but could not obtain until we changed to some other forms of power."[33] So the company bought three GE 4-ton diesel locomotives over the next year as they phased out of electric propulsion. To continue the mail contract, a diesel locomotive pulled an old electric passenger car from town to town with the mail.

Outlook for the W&OD Brightens

The next few years were profitable ones for the W&OD as World War II freight contracts brought new revenue and there was no passenger service loss on the books. But as gas rationing for the war effort made it difficult for defense workers to commute, the W&OD was pressured to resume passenger service. Nellie Fletcher saw an opportunity and lobbied the state transportation authorities in Richmond to force passenger service to start again. She argued that …"it seemed illogical – and unpatriotic – for trains to travel daily from Purcellville to within walking distance of Washington's Rosslyn streetcar terminal without taking along government war workers."[34] Nellie got her way, and the W&OD was told to begin passenger service in March of 1943..

The challenge was that the railroad had no passenger cars and new self-propelled units were in short supply. W&OD management went shopping and found several used, cast-

[31] Harwood, Pg. 80.
[32] Harwood, Pg. 81.
[33] Harwood, Pg. 84.
[34] "Woman and Motor Cars Shape Railroad's Life." *Northern Virginia Sun*, Arlington, VA, 25 June 1969, Pg. 9.

off cars including a two-car gas-electric powered passenger combo rented from the Pennsylvania Railroad. It could carry 75 passengers and its top speed was 45 mph. A local newspaper described the performance of the car…. "a glass of water would spill as she rolls along but she rides no rougher than a suburban trolley."[35] Unfortunately, the old equipment was prone to frequent breakdowns and had a difficult time with some of the steeper grades on the W&OD, particularly coming west from Rosslyn and in Loudoun County.

More secondhand equipment was purchased but proved unreliable, often having to be pulled by diesel locomotives to make the passenger runs. Eventually better equipment was added, and the passenger service was reasonably successful while gas was in short supply. But after the war ended and gas was plentiful, people went back to their cars and ridership dropped again.

In 1945, profits from freight and passenger services were robust enough that the owner of the W&OD, Davis Elkins, arranged to buy the Alexandria to Purcellville rail line from the Southern Railway who after all these years still held title to the property. He acquired the 47-mile right-of-way for $70,000, an outright bargain since that section plus the seven miles to Bluemont was valued at $1.9 million in 1916.[36]

The passenger service was discontinued, for good this time, in 1951 when the Postal Service decided not to renew the mail contract and switch to a trucking company. The same outcry about the loss of the service was largely ignored and the last passenger car ran on May 31st of that year.

A New Owner and New Possibilities

Something happened in 1954 which might have kept the W&OD running into the 21st century and would've changed the look of eastern Loudoun. Ordinarily, the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad (C&O) wouldn't have had any interest in the W&OD's operation but there was an opportunity for the large railroad to supply a new Potomac Electric and Power Company plant with coal. PEPCO had purchased 500 acres along the Potomac River in Sterling with plans to build a large coal-fired power plant. The C&O bought the W&OD so they could run 40 carloads a day, as a start, up the line from Alexandria and over to a new river-side facility using a new sidetrack from Sterling.

PEPCO needed approvals to build their plant as it would pull water from and discharge it back to the Potomac to cool the boilers, a process they estimated would raise the river water temperature by as much as 7 degrees. The first smokestack would be 400 feet tall with plans to add a 700-foot-tall stack as the plant grew.

By 1955 the fight was on between Loudoun County in Virginia and Montgomery County in Maryland for the tax dollars the plant would bring. The argument from Maryland was that since the power would be used in that state the plant should be located there.

---

[35] Walter Wood, 19 March 1943, "Farmers Gape as Steamliner Makes Trial Run to Leesburg." *The Washington Post*, Washington D.C., Pg. 19.
[36] Harwood, Pg. 90.

Maryland also owned the river although the Army Corps of Engineers would be the agency to approve the use of river water. PEPCO chose the Loudoun site for the low tax rate Loudoun offered, the favorable riverside elevations to build upon and proximity to the W&OD and Alexandria's Potomac Yards for supply of the coal they would need.[37]

The C&O Railroad purchased 2,500 acres around the proposed PEPCO site in Sterling for future development. The railroad envisioned brick and steel companies and other manufacturers locating there and shipping products in and out using the trains hauling coal to the plant.

PEPCO received all the approvals they needed for the plant – from the Army Corps of Engineers, the state of Virginia, the Loudoun Board of Supervisors and even from small groups such as the Purcellville Garden Club, who wanted the county to benefit from the tax dollars.

In the end Montgomery County offered PEPCO a better deal and the plant was built in Dickerson, Maryland with two 400-foot smokestacks and eventually the 700-foot smokestack. The property along the Potomac in Sterling became an employee golf course and recreation area for PEPCO employees, although during the mid-1970s the company sold it to the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (NVRPA), and it became Algonkian Regional Park. The C&O kept their land until the 1980's when they sold it to a developer who built 6,500 homes in the community known as Cascades.

The C&O held onto the W&OD and used it as a training ground for upcoming executives in the larger company. While not anticipating much in the way of profits, the W&OD had a few good years as the area of Northern Virginia grew. The proximity to the new airport at Dulles brought a windfall as sand was hauled from Alexandria to Sterling. Although the railroad decided not to build a track to the construction site, they did have a transfer station where the sand could be loaded onto trucks for the trip to the airport.

The construction of the Circumferential Highway, now called the Washington Beltway, was another bonanza for the W&OD. Trap Rock Quarry, by the railroad at Goose Creek, had the type of stone needed for the highway base and many carloads of gravel were sent east for the road construction.

The condition of the railroad was in decline by this point and the C&O didn't spend much to upgrade it. The old rails had become brittle from so many years of service and sometimes cracked, resulting in derailments. Lack of preventative maintenance on the many culverts led to collapsed track beds as heavily loaded trains ran over them. Old bridges could no longer handle the weight of the loads required by the sand and stone contracts and rather than build brand new bridges, the C&O Railroad brought in scrapped truss bridges discarded from other lines.

[37]Aubrey Graves, "Power Plant Generates Heat Now." *The Washington Post*, Washington D.C., 5 October 1955, E1.

The Railroad Ends but the W&OD Lives On

So, it was inevitable that the C&O would consider abandonment for the W&OD Railroad and that action was filed with the Interstate Commerce Commission on February 5, 1965. What wasn't known at the time was that the C&O had a 1960 secret agreement with the Virginia Department of Transportation to sell that agency the line once it was shut down.[38] VDOT wanted the rail property for a future road, Interstate 66, using some of the main line east of Falls Church and the Rosslyn connector. The rest of the main rail line from Alexandria to Purcellville would go to Virginia Electric and Power Company for transmission lines.

Several groups opposed abandonment including various railway and transportation lobbies, the Loudoun Board of Supervisors, and the newly formed W&OD Users Association. The Users Association was formed by businesses and industrial users in Loudoun who wanted to continue freight service to the county and thought that establishing a steam locomotive excursion service could help pay the bills. The judge in a lawsuit brought by the association ruled that an inexperienced group was unlikely to turn around the losses the railroad was incurring and that an excursion line would not be successful.[39]

ICC judges determined that the W&OD was losing money and was no longer a viable operation. The verdict for abandonment was issued on January 23, 1968.

Before that verdict, a new regional agency, the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA), asked for a delay so they could study the W&OD for other transportation uses such as a bus route or light rail. While they didn't issue results from a study, it's likely they found that the W&OD line wasn't feasible for those purposes. Even in the mid-1960's the area around the railroad was becoming heavily developed, particularly in the Fairfax/Arlington area, with many housing developments on either side of the tracks. The W&OD ran straight through business districts in Arlington, Falls Church, Vienna, Herndon, and Leesburg where high-speed rail wouldn't be a good fit. Also, a new Metro line using the W&OD route would have to cross as many as 55 existing at-grade road crossings, requiring them to either be rerouted or bridged…an expensive proposition

Since WMATA surely knew about VDOT's plans to build I-66 through Arlington County on rail property and since the Dulles Airport Access Road was nearby at the Beltway, they must have determined that using existing or soon to be built highway right-of-way for Metrorail would be more cost effective and less intrusive to the community.

With the abandonment verdict in hand, the W&OD Railroad stopped all service on August 27, 1968.

As planned, VDOT used a short portion of the Bluemont Branch section of the W&OD in Arlington and the Rosslyn Connector track line to build I-66.

---

[38] Harwood, PP. 103-103.
[39] Williams, Pg. 110.

VEPCO, now Dominion Energy, began upgrading transmission lines already located on the W&OD and soon added more.

The idea of using the W&OD for a different type of transportation never went away. Almost as soon as the last locomotive left the tracks there was a call for a trail using the W&OD. In fact, people were already taking to the abandoned property for hiking and biking on the rough ground where the rails and crossties had been removed.

The Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority was the only agency with membership of the counties and cities covering most of the route. Through an agreement with VEPCO, NVRPA built a section of paved trail through the city of Falls Church to see if a multi-use trail would be popular. It was hugely successful and there were calls for the trail to be extended east through Arlington and west into Loudoun County.

Loudoun was the only jurisdiction not a member of NVRPA when the test section was built but joined in 1973, in time to participate in the purchase agreement of 1977 for NVRPA to buy the rail line from the Alexandria border in Shirlington to the town of Purcellville. The purchase was made in sections as funds and grants became available – trail construction followed as each section was acquired.

Now several million trips a year are taken on the W&OD Trail by people walking, cycling, skating and even horseback riding. While the trail was originally planned as a recreation resource, it has become an important transportation and commuting route with numerous schools, community centers, businesses and even two Metrorail stations located nearby.

The W&OD is still fulfilling its purpose from 175 years ago, as a transportation corridor, just in a way which wasn't imagined at that time.

Works Cited

The Mirror. Leesburg, VA, 1 April 1874.

Loudoun Mirror. Leesburg, VA, 12 November 1873.

Dulaney, Mrs. Ida. *Diary of Mrs. Ida Dulany*. Aldie: Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, VA, 9 August 1861, Pg. 16.

Emmert, Wiliam B. W&OD Railway Company Memorandum to W&OD Attorney Francis T. Homer. Memo. NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection. 1916.

Emmert, William B. W&OD Railway Company Bulletin No. 150. Memo. NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection. 1916

Emmert, William B. W&OD Railway Company Bulletin No. 208. Memo, NOVA Parks, W&OD Railroad Collection. 1917

Gernand, Bradley E. *A Virginia Village Goes to War Falls Church During the Civil War*. Virginia Beach: The Donning Company Publishers, 2002. Pg. 36.

Graves, Aubrey. "Power Plant Just Generates Heat Now." *The Washington Post*. Washington D.C., 5 October 1955, E1.

Harwood, Herbert H. Jr. *Rails to the Blue Ridge*. Fairfax Station, VA: Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, 2009.

Manning, J.F. *Eudora Farm*. Unpublished Manuscript, 4 August 1935.

NPS. "Great Falls of the Potomac." National Park Service, n.d. Website. <https://www.nps.gov/grfa/learn/nature/falls.htm>.

"Organized Labor May Hit Strikers." *Evening Star*, Washington D.C., 13 May 1916.

"Railroad Man for 50 Years Says This Is No Time to Retire." *The Washington Post*, Washington D.C., 16 September 1951, M16.

Sharp, Thomas R. "Diary of Thomas R. Sharp, Confederate Railroad Service." July-August 1861. The original of the diary is at the Virginia Tech University Library, Blacksburg, VA.

Southern. "Southern Railway Meeting Flier." Snickersville, VA, April 1900.

"Stage Coaches to Stations." *Alexandria Gazette*. Alexandria, VA, 1 July 1881.

Thomas, Ann Whitehead. *A Story of Round Hill*. Leesburg, VA: Friends of Balch Library Inc., 2004.

Tosh, Frank. *W&OD*. Interview by Paul McCray. 2002.

Virginia, Commonwealth of. *Legislative Petitions Digital Collection*. 2021. Website. <https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/petitions>.

Weyraugh, Joseph. *W&OD Railroad*. Interview by Paul McCray. 1990.

"What's the Matter with Ashburn?" *Loudoun Mirror*. Leesburg, VA, 26 May 1916.

Williams, Ames W. *Washington & Old Dominion Railroad 1847-1968*. Arlington VA: Arlington Historical Society, 1989.

"Woman and Motor Cars Shape Railroad's Life." *Northern Virginia Sun*. Fairfax, 25 June 1969. Pg. 9.

Wood, Walter. "Farmers Gape as Steamliner Makes Trial Run to Leesburg." *The Washington Post*. Washington D.C., 19 March 1943. Pg. 19.