

THE WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA RAILROAD, 1855-1894

---

A thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

Western Carolina University

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

---

by

William Hutson Abrams, Jr.

August 6, 1976

## PREFACE

The Western North Carolina Railroad was the instrumental force in opening up the isolated communities of Western North Carolina. This paper will deal primarily with the construction of this railroad which left Salisbury, climbed the mountains to Asheville, and continued to terminal points of Paint Rock and Ducktown, on the Tennessee Line. The difficulties encountered during construction will be emphasized along with the political aspects that went along with construction.

Emphasis will be placed on the time between the State's acquisition of the Railroad in 1875 and the completion to Murphy in 1891. An introductory chapter will briefly cover the start of the railroad in 1855, its role in the Civil War, and the delays in construction caused by the scandals of the Reconstruction Period. Starting with 1875, a vital element in the construction, convict labor, will be dealt with.

The management of the railroad varied between state and private ownership. It suffered the financial pains that many early lines endured. Most of all, it was hindered by the ever present problem presented by nature as the track was built through some of the roughest terrain east of the Rocky Mountains. This was really the significant feature of the railroad because at many times its further construction seemed to be impossible. Political, financial, managerial, and labor problems testify to the trying task that was accomplished and to the desire of the people of the western part of the state to have their railroad.

It is hoped that the reader will be made aware of the actual cost of construction. Laying a track over the Blue Ridge Mountains, in itself, was a major accomplishment. Only when one realizes the hard work and

disappointments of the people working on the railroad will its importance be realized. The railroad was a classic example of the early railroad construction. New experiments in railroad building were tried; but it was mostly built by hand, except for the use of nitroglycerine, which was used on this railroad for the first time in the Southeast. Confronted with a difficult task, even with modern equipment, the railroad builders of the 1800's deserve credit for completing the project.

Final emphasis will be placed on the actual opening of a previously isolated region. An overall view of the construction of the Western North Carolina Railroad and its importance in opening Western North Carolina will be presented in this paper.

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

William Hutson Abrams, Jr., M. A., August, 1976. History.

"The Western North Carolina Railroad, 1855-1894"

Many people fail to realize the actual cost in time and labor that was spent in constructing the Western North Carolina Railroad from Salisbury to Murphy. They also fail to realize that this railroad was built almost entirely by convict labor and was instrumental in opening up the isolated mountain region of western North Carolina. The purpose of this thesis is to show the difficulties that had to be overcome in building this railroad over the mountains, to describe the important role that convict labor played in this engineering feat and to relate the importance of the coming of the railroad into western North Carolina.

Private manuscript collections of the builders of the railroad and collected documents of other railroad personalities have been indispensable for this study. The Annual Meeting of the Stockholders Reports yielded much information. Careful examination of North Carolina State Government documents and period newspapers has been useful. The North Carolina Penitentiary Reports have also proven helpful. Secondary sources such as monographs and special studies, periodicals, pamphlets, and unpublished works were invaluable. The above materials can be found in the North Carolina State Archives at Raleigh and in the Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The results of this research reveal that convict labor was the most important element in building the Western North Carolina Railroad and that the Western North Carolina Railroad had a major influence in opening up the mountain communities of western North Carolina.

*Richard H. Votaw*  
Thesis Director

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. The Western North Carolina Railroad, 1855-1861 . . . . .	1
2. Civil War Destruction of the Western North Carolina Railroad, 1861-1865 . . . . .	13
3. Reconstruction and the Western North Carolina Railroad, 1866-1876 . . . . .	22
4. The Western North Carolina Railroad Opens Up Western North Carolina, 1876-1882 . . . . .	33
5. The Completion of the Western North Carolina Railroad, 1882-1891 . . . . .	55
CONCLUSION . . . . .	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	67
ABSTRACT . . . . .	75

## Chapter I

### The Western North Carolina Railroad, 1855-1861

In 1854, the State of North Carolina was completing the construction of her great work, the North Carolina Railroad, which extended from Goldsboro to Charlotte. The Western North Carolina Railroad was accordingly incorporated to connect the North Carolina Railroad with the Valley of the Mississippi. This incorporation act of February 15, 1855, provided for the organization of the Western North Carolina Railroad with power

to construct a railroad, with one or more tracks, from the town of Salisbury on the North Carolina Railroad, passing by or as near as practicable to Statesville, in the County of Iredell, to some point on the French Broad River, beyond the Blue Ridge, and if the legislature shall hereafter determine, to such point as shall designate, at a future session.<sup>1</sup>

The charter specified that the railroad should be constructed in sections beginning at Salisbury. As soon as the first section was completed and in operation and one-third of the estimated cost of the second section raised in stock subscriptions from private sources, then the State would take the remaining two-thirds of this estimated cost in capital stock. In like manner, the capital could be raised for the third section as soon as the second section was in operation. Each section would thus have to be finished and equipped before any steps could be taken to build the succeeding section.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Laws of North Carolina 1854-55, ch. 228, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup>A number of votes was secured for the bill by putting in the section provision as it was intended to postpone the rolling up of a huge state debt and to prevent the dissipation of efforts along the proposed routes. Cecil Kenneth Brown, A State Movement In Railroad Development--The Story of North Carolina's First Effort to Establish an East and West Trunk Line Railroad (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1928) 104. (Hereinafter cited as Brown, A State Movement).

The maximum allowable capital stock was to be \$6 million. The sum of \$300,000 was to be secured in stock subscription from private sources to build the first section of the road. The state would take \$600,000 worth of capital stock upon its subscription. The company was to be organized as soon as \$300,000 was subscribed and five percent of it paid.<sup>3</sup>

Governance of the railroad was to be in the hands of twelve directors, four elected by the individuals and counties that subscribed one-third of the original stock and eight by the state, which took the remaining two-thirds. The governor was to appoint the eight state directors with the advice and consent of the council of state. All of the directors had to be citizens of the state, had to own stock in the railroad, and were subject to annual election or appointment.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of president of the railroad was given to the twelve directors, limiting them to one of the members of the board. The board could select other officers without qualifications set by the state.<sup>5</sup>

After stock-raising conventions at Salisbury and Statesville, the stockholders met in Salisbury on August 30, 1855, and organized the company. Upon the solicitation of representatives of Burke County, a resolution was passed making Morganton the terminus of the first section of the railroad. After this was done, citizens of Burke promptly came forward with a subscription of \$100,000 to the capital stock, making the total private stock \$400,000. On September 20, 1855, the State subscribed \$800,000 worth of the capital stock and appointed eight representatives

<sup>3</sup>Brown, A State Movement, 104. Public Laws of the State of North Carolina 1854-55, ch. 228, p. 259. (Raleigh: Holden and Wilson, Printers to the State, 1855), ch. 228, p. 259. (Hereinafter cited as Public Laws of North Carolina, 1854-55).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

to the Company's board of directors.<sup>6</sup> "The state's directors would eventually include such prominent men as Nicholas W. Woodfin, William H. Thomas, William Waighstill Avery, and George F. Davidson.]

The directors organized on October 5, 1855, by electing Robert C. Pearson of Burke County president of the railroad. James C. Turner, who had made the original surveys of the western extension in 1853 under the direction of Walter Gwynn, was appointed chief engineer, replacing Gwynn who had resigned. Working under Turner, in addition to Robert C. McCalla and D. Nereus Mendenhall, were Samuel S. Kirkland, William A. Eliason, Thaddeus Coleman, and Robert E. Rodes.<sup>7</sup>

Turner was instructed to locate the railroad from Salisbury to Morganton via Statesville and Newton. Two surveying parties were sent out; one surveyed the route from Salisbury to the Catawba River; the other, from the Catawba River to Morganton. A report on the survey as far as the Catawba River was given on January 17, 1856; and the full report on the survey to Morganton was given on July 1, 1856. By running his line 2,500 feet south of Statesville instead of through the town, Turner saved half a mile in distance and \$27,000 in cost and afforded better grades for the railroad. Turner reported that Newton would be very difficult to approach. To reach Newton, heavy fills and deep cuts would have to be made and an 1,800 foot, 5-degree curve introduced because of leaving the main ridge. It was regained later. Turner pointed out that this route was not the best line between Salisbury and

<sup>6</sup>Proceedings of the General Meeting of Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road Company, at Salisbury August 30, 1855 with Charter and By-Laws of the Company. p. 10. Printed at the Banner Office, Salisbury, N. C., 1855.

<sup>7</sup>Second Annual Report of the President and Directors to the Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road Company, Together with the Proceedings of the Stockholders at their Annual Meeting Held in Statesville, on the 28th of August, 1856. President's Report, p. 7. Salisbury: Printed at the Watchman Office, 1856. (Hereinafter cited as Second Annual Report, 1856).



Morganton. By passing to the north of Newton, the road might be shortened by 2 1/4 miles, would cost \$176,887 less, and would have less curvature and better grades. If the road were so built, the distance from Salisbury to Morganton would be 75.65 miles; and the cost including equipment would be \$1,858,182.50.<sup>8</sup>

Turner's survey resulted in two problems for the railroad. The first problem came from Burke County when stock subscribers there realized that the \$1,200,000 of capital would not complete the railroad to Morganton but to a point 20 miles east of the town. They pointed out that their subscriptions had been made with the understanding that Morganton would be the western terminus of the first section of the railroad. The second problem came up over the Newton survey. Citizens of Catawba County stated that the other stockholders had agreed that, if the road passed through the county, it would go through Newton. The board of directors of the railroad decided to refer these problems to the next General Assembly.

In the meantime, contracts for grading, sills, and masonry on the 25 miles from Salisbury to Statesville were let on March 11, 1856, at the figure of Turner's estimate. On July 14, 1856, contracts were also let for building the railroad from Statesville (12 miles), to the west bank of the Catawba River.<sup>9</sup>

[The General Assembly of 1856 took the Newton and Morganton problems into consideration and passed an act amending the charter of the railroad on February 2, 1857.] It first stated that the board of directors might locate the road within two miles of Newton or a branch not more than three

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 9. In the letting of contracts stockholders were preferred, as the charter, by its express terms, contemplated the payment of stock subscribed by the individuals, in work and labor; and in effect, directed that the stockholders should be preferred in letting the contracts for construction on the railroad.

miles' length from the main road to Newton. If the board elected to follow neither of these plans, then the stock subscribers living in Newton were to be released from their subscriptions. Second, the amendment stated that books might be opened to secure from \$200,000 to \$300,000 of new capital and that the State would take double the amount so secured. The new capital was to be used to extend the first section to Morganton but no farther. Third, the amendment stated that books might be opened to secure subscriptions for stock sufficient to pay one-third of the cost of building the second section, which was to extend from Morganton to a point not more than ten miles east of the western portal of the Swannanoa tunnel. This would be done provided that the State would not take its two-thirds of stock until the first section should have been completely finished, equipped, and in operation.<sup>10</sup>

The provisions of the above amendment were accepted by the stockholders at a called meeting on April 14, 1857. Turner had estimated that the first \$1,200,000 of capital would build the road to Hale's Store, some 23 miles east of Morganton; and a tentative terminus to the first section was fixed at that point. The board of directors studied the Newton matter and decided to build the road on the best route as indicated by Turner and to build a branch from the main road to Newton. The contract for building the road from the Catawba River to Hale's, including the branch, was let on June 3, 1857,<sup>11</sup> thus making a total of 52 miles in the course of construction.

In early June, 1857, books were opened to receive stock subscriptions to the amount of \$220,000. Three times the books were kept open the

<sup>10</sup>Private Laws of North Carolina 1856-57, ch. 68, p. 52. Brown, A State Movement, p. 132.

<sup>11</sup>Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road Company, with the Reports of the Officers, 1857. Salisbury: J. J. Bruner, Book and Job Printer, p. 10. President's Report. (Hereinafter cited as Third Annual Report, 1857).

required length of time and closed without a single share of the stock's having been subscribed. In the fall of 1857, the voters of Burke County rejected a proposition that the county as a corporate body take \$100,000 worth of the stock. On December 3, 1857, Charles F. Fisher, President of the North Carolina Railroad, proposed to subscribe for \$150,000 of the stock and take the contract to build the 23 miles at the engineer's estimates; but the directors rejected his proposal because they did not know where to raise the other \$70,000 to make out the \$220,000. On April 3, 1858, Burke County took \$50,000 worth of stock; and Fisher agreed to take the balance of \$170,000 on condition that he be given the contract. According to the contract signed June 10, 1858, Fisher agreed to build the entire line of 23.45 miles between Hale's and Morganton, including superstructure but not including wells, water houses, stations, and shops. The cost was \$570,782, to be paid \$170,000 in stock of the company, \$50,000 in Burke County bonds, and the balance in cash or in state bonds. The contract called for completion by January 1, 1861. The state's subscription of \$440,000 to match the private subscription of \$220,000 was made on August 10, 1858; and the work began promptly.<sup>12</sup>

In August, 1857, only about 18 miles between Salisbury and Statesville were ready for iron. Six miles were graded between Statesville and the Catawba River. The grading of the roadbed for that part of the line between Salisbury and Statesville was, by the terms of the contracts, to have been completed by July 1, 1857. Completion was delayed because of the extraordinary high prices which labor and provisions commanded and especially because of the great scarcity of the latter. The remarkably severe and

<sup>12</sup>Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company; with the Reports of the Officers, 1858. President's Report, p. 10. (Raleigh: Holden and Wilson, Standard Office, 1858). (Hereinafter cited as Fourth Annual Meeting, 1858).

prolonged winter had also greatly retarded the progress and efficiency of the operations.<sup>13</sup>

The contract for laying the track between Salisbury and Statesville was given to Charles F. Fisher, who began to do the work under supervision of the company's engineer in the spring of 1858.

In August, 1858, at the Annual Meeting, James C. Turner reported that the iron was laid down and trains were running over 20 miles of the line west from Salisbury. Thus, in completion of the first 20 miles, two years and six months had been expended. Turner felt this to be sufficient progress because of the difficult terrain over which the track was being laid. Turner reported on this terrain as follows:

The topographical features of the country between Salisbury and Morganton, exhibit that irregularity of outline and variety which usually characterize all countries of a primitive formation, and there is no part of the State, not actually in the mountains, more broken up with numerous high and steep hills.<sup>14</sup>

Late in 1858, President Robert C. Pearson made plans to extend the road down the French Broad River to Paint Rock on the Tennessee line. The line was examined by Robert C. McCalla, engineer, who stated that the line would not cost as much per mile as the railroad from Salisbury to Morganton. His estimate for the entire line was \$5,424,325. Inasmuch as no new capital would be needed over and above the \$6 million which had been authorized in the original charter, the General Assembly was asked to allow the railroad to proceed to Paint Rock.

The Asheville News, Asheville's newspaper, considered the further extension of the railroad to be the prime issue in the political campaign of 1858.<sup>15</sup> Both candidates for the governorship, John W. Ellis and Duncan K. McRae, favored the removal of the section feature of the charter.

<sup>13</sup>Third Annual Report, 1857, Chief Engineer's Report, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup>Fourth Annual Meeting, 1858, Chief Engineer's Report, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup>Asheville (North Carolina) News, July 29, 1858.

McRae stated that he favored finishing the road but would not go in for any new appropriations for the next two years. Ellis did not think any new appropriations would be needed; but if they should be needed, he was willing to have them made.<sup>16</sup>

The West was represented by William H. Thomas of Haywood, Bayles M. Edney of Buncombe, and James A. Fagg of Madison. Among these men there was a lack of unanimity as to the route west of Asheville, but all were agreed that the section restriction should be removed and the railroad allowed to proceed. Their chief contention was that the State's pledge to give \$4 million to the railroad should be made good. Their opponents adopted an attitude of waiting. They claimed that the lack of agreement among friends of the railroad as to the route west of Asheville was a just cause for delaying construction.<sup>17</sup>

The bill which would have removed restrictions on the railroad was defeated in the House on February 15, 1859, by a vote of 34 to 55. The next day the Senate rejected it by a vote of 15 to 24. However, an act was passed on February 15, 1859, which authorized the company to survey a route from Asheville to a point on the route of the Blue Ridge Railroad or to the Tennessee state line at or near Ducktown. The company could also survey a line down the French Broad to Paint Rock and adopt either route desired. The State was to pay for the surveys out of the original appropriation of \$4 million.<sup>18</sup>

The company decided to go ahead with the second section as a private undertaking without state aid. Turner's estimates for the second section

<sup>16</sup>Brown, A State Movement, p. 139; Asheville (North Carolina), News, July 22, 1858.

<sup>17</sup>Raleigh (North Carolina), North Carolina Standard, February 12, 1859.

<sup>18</sup>Private Laws of North Carolina, 1858-1859, ch. 170, p. 217.

were as follows: from Morganton to a point one mile west of Old Fort, 33.5 miles, \$959,693; thence to the western portal of Swannanoa tunnel, 10 miles, \$1,393,800; total, 43.5 miles, \$2,353,493.<sup>19</sup>

The contracts for building the entire second section were let before the end of 1859. They specified that the company would not pay for any work until the first section of the railroad was completed to Morganton when the state was to become a helper in the construction above Morganton. The contractors thus began work on their own resources.<sup>20</sup>

The question of a proper terminus was raised by the citizens of the West. They offered to buy stock up to the amount of one-third of the cost of building the road from the western portal of the Swannanoa tunnel to the French Broad River, and to take the contract to build the road at the engineer's estimate, if the company would make the French Broad River the terminus of the second section.<sup>21</sup>

The board of directors thought that the General Assembly meant for the terminus to be somewhere between the western portal of the tunnel and a point ten miles east thereof; but, in order to have the matter definitely settled, they referred it to the Board of Internal Improvements. Bartholomew Figures Moore, the attorney for the State Board of Internal Improvements, on December 3, 1859, presented a number of reasons as to why the terminus could not be west of the western portal of the tunnel.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road Company, Held in Statesville, August 30, 1860. Salisbury, N. C. (President's Report, p. 10). (Salisbury: Carolina Watchman Office, 1860). (Hereinafter cited as Sixth Annual Meeting, 1860).

<sup>20</sup>Brown, A State Movement, p. 143; Asheville (North Carolina), News, December 22, 1859.

<sup>21</sup>Sixth Annual Meeting, 1860, President's Report, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup>A full account of Moore's opinion may be found on p. 34 of the Sixth Annual Meeting - Appendix A.

On August 30, 1860, President Robert C. Pearson gave an encouraging report to the General Assembly. Cars were running to the Catawba River, a distance of 37 1/2 miles from Salisbury, transporting freight and passengers, and conveying the U. S. mail. The bridge over the Catawba River was behind in construction because of an unsteady foundation; but cross-ties were laid to Hale's Store, 23 miles from Morganton, awaiting the iron rails that would come with completion of the bridge.<sup>23</sup>

Charles F. Fisher's contract to build the railroad as far as Morganton had not been completed by the end of 1860, as had been anticipated, so the State did not at that time come in as stockholder in the Second Section. The result was embarrassing, for the contractors on the Second Section could not receive any money for their work. The General Assembly passed an act on February 18, 1861, which removed the difficulty by making the entire line from Salisbury to the western portal of the Swannanoa tunnel one section. This was intended to make the state begin its payments on the road above Morganton.<sup>24</sup>

This part of the state's subscription was not, however, promptly paid. By March, 1861, the contractors working above Morganton had been about \$100,000 worth of work and received nothing for it. The state treasurer advertised bonds; but political conditions and the depreciation of state securities caused Governor Ellis to withhold payment to the company whereupon all work above Morganton was suspended on April 29, 1861. At a Second Extra Session of the General Assembly, September, 1861,

<sup>23</sup>Proceedings of an Annual Meeting of Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road, Held in Salisbury, August 25-26, 1859. (Salisbury, North Carolina, Carolina Watchman Office), President's Report, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup>Private Laws of North Carolina, 1860-1861, ch. 138, p. 154.

the General Assembly authorized Governor Henry Toole Clark to have the state treasurer issue bonds for the purpose of paying \$200,000 to the Western North Carolina Railroad on the line above Morganton. The payment was made in December, 1861.<sup>25</sup>

The question of a terminus for the Western Division had to be decided. The cheapest plan was to stop at Paint Rock where connections could be made with the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad; another idea was to build via Waynesville to Ducktown. This second plan, Ducktown, was adopted. It provided a through line from the Tennessee line to the Carteret County seaport of Beaufort. The question of the Paint Rock connection was left to the Greenville and French Broad Company, which planned a road from South Carolina via Asheville down the French Broad Valley. On Charles F. Fisher's motion, the stockholders adopted the Ducktown route on November 23, 1860, by a stock vote of 3,714 to 173.<sup>26</sup>

This action was ratified by the General Assembly in the act of February 18, 1861. The act provided that the end of the Second Section of the railroad should be at Asheville. The Third Section was to extend from Asheville to Waynesville. At the time the books were opened for the Third Section, the Company was also to open books for stock to construct a branch down the French Broad to Paint Rock.<sup>27</sup>

Progress on the railroad west of Statesville was very slow. After the Catawba River Bridge was completed, the railroad was put into operation to a point near Hale's Store by February 22, 1860. By the end of August,

<sup>25</sup>Public Laws of North Carolina, Second Extra Session, 1861, p. 134.

<sup>26</sup>Proceedings of a Called Meeting of Stockholders of the Western N. C. Rail Road, Held in Salisbury, November 23, 1860. (Salisbury, N. C., J. J. Bruner, 1860), (President's Report, p. 9).

<sup>27</sup>Private Laws of North Carolina, 1860-1861, ch. 138, p. 154.



1860, the line was completed and in operation to a point 13 miles east of Morganton.<sup>28</sup> When the Civil War broke out and Fisher left to join the army, the road lacked 5 1/2 miles of reaching Morganton.<sup>29</sup> After Fisher was killed at First Manassas on July 21, 1861, his administrators were released from fulfilling the obligations of his contract. The board of directors then gave William F. McKesson a contract to finish the railroad up to Morganton.<sup>30</sup> McKesson's contract called for completion by May 1, 1863; But the war so interferred with the work that the terms of the contract were not fulfilled. On August 27, 1863, the roadbed was ready for the iron to a point within two miles of Morganton.<sup>31</sup> During the year ending July 1, 1864, no grading was done; but iron was laid from Speagle's, where Fisher had left the end of the track, to a point three miles nearer Morganton.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Sixth Annual Meeting, 1860, President's Report, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup>Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company; With the Reports of the Officers, 1861. President's Report, p. 8. (Raleigh: Printed at the Office of the State Journal, 1862).

<sup>30</sup>Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of Stockholders of the Western N. C. Rail Road Company, Held In Morganton, August 28, 1862. Chief Engineer's Report, p. 7. (Salisbury, N. C.: Printed at the Carolina Watchman Office, 1862). (Hereinafter cited as Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1862).

<sup>31</sup>Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of Stockholders of the Western N.C. Railroad Held in Salisbury, September 11, 1863, Chief Engineer's Report, p. 3. (Salisbury, N. C., Printed by J. J. Bruner, 1863).

<sup>32</sup>Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the Western N. C. Rail Road, Held in Statesville, August 25, 1864. Chief Engineer's Report, p. 2. (Statesville, N. C., Printed at the Job Office of the Iredell Express, 1864).

## Chapter II

### *The Construction of the Western North Carolina Railroad, 1861-1865*

Progressing under good management, the Western Carolina Railroad played an important role in transporting troops and supplies to Lee's army in Virginia. The Company resolved that no person would be appointed director, engineer, superintendent, conductor, or to any office or post unless he was a non-conscript, disabled soldier or exempt from the service on account of physical infirmity.<sup>1</sup>

On August 29, 1861, Railroad President Alexander M. Powell told the North Carolina General Assembly that construction would be completed to Morganton by the winter. All work had ceased west of Morganton by order of the Board of Directors on April 29, leaving the President and Chief Engineer to prosecute, if possible, the completion of the railroad to Morganton. Powell reported that the Railroad would render every facility in its power to the Army even if the expense of running the trains and keeping the machinery and roadway could barely be met.<sup>2</sup>

By 1862, the problem of a shortage of labor was evident to the railroad's promoters. William H. Thomas and Augustus S. Merrimon, in letters to Governor Vance, suggested that a resolution be introduced in the General Assembly, inquiring into the propriety of sending slaves from the eastern part of the state to work on the Western North Carolina

<sup>1</sup>Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of Stockholders of the Western N. C. Railroad Held in Salisbury, September 11, 1863. President's Report, p. 1, (Salisbury; N. C., Printed by J. J. Bruner, 1863). Hereinafter cited as Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1863.

<sup>2</sup>Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1862, President's Report, p. 7.

Railroad.<sup>3</sup> A resolution was introduced in the House of Commons on November 22, 1862, which instructed the Committee on Internal Improvements to inquire into the propriety of authorizing the Governor to employ slaves on internal improvement projects. Jesse Walker, of Madison County, was author of the resolution; but nothing came of it as it was never reported out of committee.

The slaves that were used on the railroad were hired on a yearly basis by contract with the slave owners. The contracts provided for the payment of a specified sum to the owner with the railroad's furnishing board and clothing for the slaves. The wages of slaves varied, but it usually ran \$75-\$150 a year for unskilled labor and \$200-\$250 for skilled labor. The number of slaves for hire depended upon the condition of agriculture. Because 1860 was a prosperous year for agriculture, there was a scarcity of slaves available for work on the railroad.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the great trouble and inconvenience experienced in hiring new laborers each year, other problems were encountered in the use of slave labor. The slaves were often of an inferior type and hard to manage. After the time and trouble had been taken to train the slaves to perform the duties required, the owners would demand higher pay as soon as the contract ran out. The railroad was, therefore, forced to train them or to hire new slaves and instruct them in their duties. Another difficulty was that contracts often specified that the slaves not be taken from certain localities. Since the slaves were frequently used as firemen or brakemen, this limitation added further difficulty in the use of slave labor.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Frontis W. Johnston, (ed.), The Papers of Zebulon B. Vance, 1843-1862. (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1963) I, 385.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Lewis Price, "The Railroads of North Carolina During the Civil War: (Unpublished master's thesis, the University of North Carolina, 1951), 27. Hereinafter cited as Price, "Railroads of North Carolina During the Civil War."

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

As a result of William W. Holden's "Peace Meetings," an amendment by Tod R. Caldwell was passed at a meeting of stockholders on September 11, 1863. William W. Holden was editor of Raleigh Standard and advocated in his paper that the South should give up the fight and make peace with the North before the South was devastated. This amendment stated that no person who was a subscriber to the Raleigh Standard should be employed in any capacity on the railroad.<sup>6</sup>

In regard to the Montgomery Convention of April 26, 1861, which called for a uniform rate for government passengers and freight, James C. Turner urged the railroad stockholders not to adopt the resolutions of the Convention. The Montgomery Convention rates were two cents per mile for government passengers and one half the regular local rate for government freight. Since the railroad was not on the through route supplying the army, the amount of government transportation on the railroad would not justify the lower rates. The stockholders did not heed Turner's recommendation, and the Montgomery rate schedule was adopted.<sup>7</sup>

The railroad was successful in its operations for much of the war. President Powell reported on August 27, 1863, that during the fiscal year 1862-1863, the total gross earnings of the railroad were \$162,766.55; and its net earnings were \$80,040.14 Powell explained:

A most gratifying evidence of the success of the road is found in the fact that during the war, the business of the road has steadily increased, and not so much from freights and travel on other roads as from the products of our own, in fact, the principal part of the service over other roads has been in transporting the meat and bread of Western North Carolina to our brave soldiers in the field.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1863, President's Report, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1862, Chief Engineer's Report, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1863, President's Report, p. 7.

The first military action on the Western North Carolina Railroad did not come until June, 1864. Then, while the passes through the mountains were undefended, Colonel George W. Kirk of East Tennessee led a daring raid upon Camp Vance, a Confederate training camp, near Morganton. On June 13, Kirk, with 130 men, including 12 Indians, left Morristown, Tennessee. His main purpose was not simply the pillage and destruction of Camp Vance. He wanted also to capture a train on the Western North Carolina Railroad, to make a swift dash to Salisbury to release Federal prisoners, and possibly to burn the important bridge over the Yadkin River just north of that town. He brought along a locomotive engineer in case of success. During the attack on Morganton, before he could cut the telegraph line, a warning was sent to Salisbury; and a force of home and prison guards was raised to pursue him. With his plan foiled, Kirk took a few men and went down to the head of the railroad where he burned the depot, destroyed four railroad cars, and damaged one engine before escaping across the Blue Ridge to Tennessee.<sup>9</sup>

On April 12, 1865, General George M. Stoneman's cavalry occupied Salisbury, destroying vast quantities of military stores, railroad property, public buildings, and the large Confederate Prison. Stoneman moved west toward Tennessee, systematically destroying the track as he went. His advance reached Statesville on April 13. Confederate stores and the railroad depot were burned there. Stoneman next engaged in battle at the Catawba River Bridge, 2 1/2 miles east of Morganton, an engagement which ended in the capture of that town.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), XXXIX, I, pt. i, 232-233. Hereinafter cited as Official Records.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 334.

In Morganton a group of drunken soldiers raided the home of Robert C. Pearson, official of the railroad, until a Federal officer came along and stationed a guard at the house.

Stoneman engaged in a systematic destruction of the railroad. At Salisbury, the shops and machinery were destroyed, together with all the buildings, two engines, cars, tools, maps, surveys, and papers. Following the line, the Federals burned a train of cars two miles from Salisbury, the bank and adjoining buildings, a lot of cars at Statesville, the station house and cars at Icard's, the depot and cars at the head of the railroad, and a steam saw mill five miles east of Morganton. The total destruction of property amounted to \$111,000 at pre-war prices.<sup>11</sup>

War-time prices proved to be a major problem for the railroad. Before the war, iron cost four cents per pound. In April of 1864, the price of iron had risen to \$2 - \$3 per pound. At its pre-war price, oil sold for \$1.00 per gallon; but by July, 1864, the price was \$50 a gallon. The price of flour had risen from \$6 per barrel to \$350 per barrel. Machinists who made \$2.50 a day in 1861 made \$12 per day in October of 1864.<sup>12</sup>

A lack of wood for crossties and train fuel was also a problem for the railroad management. The Confederate authorities frequently contracted those cutting wood for the railroad and, by offering exorbitant prices, induced them to break their contracts with the railroads and furnish wood for the government. During 1863, the Confederate government was paying \$5.00 per cord for wood while the railroad paid only \$1.50 per cord.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road, Held in Newton, August 31, 1865. President's Report, p. 5. (Printed at the Job Office of the American, Statesville, N.C., 1865). Hereinafter cited as Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1865.

<sup>12</sup>Price, "Railroads of North Carolina During the Civil War," 126.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-13.

To combat high prices, a load of cotton was shipped to Nassau in January, 1865, to buy supplies for the railroad. This proved a complete success as the line received in return a large supply of gum-betting, paints, oils, screws, and tacks. These materials were greatly needed for engine maintenance, and could not be obtained in the Confederacy.<sup>14</sup>

During the winter of 1864, the railroad management supplied the Confederacy with one engine and ten cars to do service on other roads. This rendered it impossible to keep a ditching train; and by the spring of 1865, the deep and narrow cuts on the railroad were nearly impassable. Stoneman's raid stopped repair work.<sup>15</sup>

At the war's end, the railroad was almost totally destroyed, money was scarce, and steady laborers could hardly be found. However, the railroad was faced with no bonded indebtedness and very few debts of any other kind. The legitimate local debt amounted to only \$3,000. In addition to this amount, \$19,584.97 was due to parties in the North for debts contracted before the war. There was an additional \$29,297.90 due in Confederate currency; but since most of this debt had been contracted near the end of the war when the currency was highly depreciated, the gold value of it was very low. During the latter part of the war, the railroad followed a policy of paying out as soon as possible the funds received. Dividends were promptly paid; Negro hire was paid in advance instead of by promissory notes as was customary; and all debts were settled punctually. As a consequence of this wise policy, the railroad had almost no currency or Confederate securities on hand at the end of the war. The road was

<sup>14</sup> Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1865, Superintendent's Report, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

unable to collect all balances due from the Confederate government; and at the close of the war, the government owed the company \$177,553.87.<sup>16</sup>

Counting the wear and tear for four years of war, during which the Company worked practically for nothing and lost property worth \$111,000, the railroad suffered to the extent of a quarter of a million dollars. All of the buildings and fixtures had been of the best material. However, newly elected President Samuel McDowell Tate felt that by the judicious use of \$20,000, the railroad could be successfully operated.<sup>17</sup>

To raise funds for repairs, the Company was able, by virtue of an excess of private stock, to call on the state for a payment of \$50,000 in the summer of 1866. Another \$50,000 worth of bonds was secured from the state later in the year. The railroad also secured a loan of \$20,000 from the Southern Express Company and two other loans aggregating \$9,000.<sup>18</sup>

By these loans, the Company was soon enabled to open the line to the public and run tri-weekly trips over the entire road. Daily train service was not started until April 1, 1869. Business was steadily increasing. The Company received \$1,700 for hauling troops for the United States and \$550 from due bills for fare. There was also the business of the Southern Express Company over the line. One economy move was initiated. All agents and other employees not indispensable to the immediate repairing of the line were discharged. The receipts were steadily applied to the payment of the laborers employed in rebuilding.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company, Held In Morganton, August 30, 1866: Together With the Annual Reports of the President, Chief Engineer, and Treasurer. Treasurer's Report, p. 3. (Statesville, N. C.: Printed at the American Office, 1866). Hereinafter cited as Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1866.

<sup>19</sup> Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1865, President's Report, p. 5.



During the first year of Reconstruction, the Company built a new shop and round house at Salisbury. At Six Mile Post, a new track and house for section hands were rebuilt; the bridges over Second and Third Creeks were supplied with trestles. A temporary depot was built at Statesville, the Catawba bridge repaired, and the saw mill and tank at Icard's rebuilt. At this terminal, 2 1/2 miles from Morganton, a small depot was constructed. At Catawba Station, a field of corn, a large crop of sorghum, and a lot of hogs were being raised for the Company. Along the line, locust trees were planted for future use as cross-ties.<sup>20</sup>

A heavier and more durable iron rail was used to replace the lighter rails that had been so badly worn during the war. At Salisbury, a new well, which was pumped by machinery from the work shop, was a great improvement over the former model, which required four hands constantly laboring at the pump to supply water. In 1866, the rolling stock of the railroad consisted of five engines, three passenger coaches, two mail cars, twelve flat cars, and five boxcars, which proved to be sufficient. Two cheap tenements were built on the Company property in Salisbury because the rent was so high that men were difficult to retain. Good iron from the switches and turnouts was laid on the track and replaced by the worn rails.<sup>21</sup>

A contract for finishing the 2 1/2 miles on Fisher's work east of Morganton was given to John A. Hunt at the engineer's estimates.<sup>22</sup> Contracts for the 33 1/3 miles from Morganton to Station 1770 just above Old Fort were awarded on July 12, 1867, at a cost of \$1,021,056. The

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1866, President's Report, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

mountain division, covering the 10 miles from Station 1770 to the western portal of the Swannanoa tunnel, was let on January 29, 1868, to John Malone and Company, at \$1,958,700.<sup>23</sup> Contracts for grading, masonry, and cross-ties on the line from Swannanoa tunnel to Asheville were let about the middle of 1868 to citizens of Buncombe County. In August, 1868, eleven contractors had a force of about 900 men at work on the 33 1/2 mile section and had been making fair progress since beginning work in October, 1867.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Annual Meeting of the Western North Carolina Railroad, with Reports of Officers, for 1868, Chief Engineer's Report, p. 3. (Eugene B. Drake and Son, Printers: Statesville, N. C.). Hereinafter cited as Annual Meeting of Stockholders, 1868.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

### Chapter III

#### Reconstruction and the Western North Carolina Railroad, 1866-1876

By 1866, the state had subscribed \$4,000,000 to the Western North Carolina Railroad, the larger part of which was expended on the line from Salisbury to Old Fort. This did not suffice to complete even that section, so the company was authorized to issue its own mortgage bonds under an act entitled, "An Act to enable the Western North Carolina Railroad Company to discharge its debts," ratified on February 20, 1867.<sup>1</sup> This law provided that the Company might issue \$50,000 of its mortgage bonds, as authorized by the Act of December 16, 1866, to discharge its pre-existing floating debt.<sup>2</sup>

The State Constitutional Convention of 1868 authorized a bond issue for the Western North Carolina Railroad for more than \$2,500,000. Most of this issue was for new construction to extend the Railroad from Morganton across the Blue Ridge into Asheville.

New construction offered the best opportunities for the adventurers who manipulated the General Assembly during Reconstruction. In the latter part of 1868, George W. Swepson, a native of North Carolina, and General Milton S. Littlefield, of New York, secured control of the Western Division of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company. From October, 1868, to October, 1869, Swepson was President of the Western Division. During this period he sold North Carolina State bonds and pocketed the proceeds.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Public Laws of North Carolina, 1866-1867, ch. 99, p. 185. (Raleigh: M. S. Littlefield, State Printer and Binder, 1867).

<sup>2</sup>Public Laws of North Carolina, 1866-1867, ch. 98, p. 156. (Raleigh: M. S. Littlefield, State Printer and Binder, 1867).

<sup>3</sup>Brown, A State Movement, 225.

To simplify the problem of winning control of the Western North Carolina Railroad, Swepson, in collaboration with Samuel McDowell Tate, conceived the idea of splitting the Railroad into two separate divisions. Swepson secured passage of "An Act to Amend the Charter of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company," ratified on August 19. This law provided that the Western North Carolina Railroad should consist of two separate and distinct divisions, one called the Eastern Division, and should embrace the road from Salisbury to the French Broad River near Asheville; the other, called the Western Division, should embrace the road from the French Broad River to Ducktown and Paint Rock on the Tennessee line. Each division was to be managed by a separate and distinct board of directors. By this act, the capital stock of the Western North Carolina Railroad was increased to \$12,000,000 for the purpose of completing the Western Division. The state was to subscribe two-thirds of this increase. The share of capital stock for the Western Division was \$6,000,000. The state was to subscribe \$4,000,000 of this sum.

The Act of August 19, 1868, left in considerable doubt what was the authorized amount of capital stock to be issued by the Eastern and Western Divisions, respectively. This ambiguity was clarified at the next session of the General Assembly.<sup>4</sup> Legislation provided that the capital stock of the Eastern Division should be increased to \$6,500,000, part of which the state was to raise.

Reconstruction Governor William W. Holden regarded the state's interest in the railroads only as a political asset of the Republican

<sup>4</sup>This was "An act amendatory of the Act to incorporate the Western North Carolina Railroad Company, ratified the fifteenth day of February, one thousand eight hundred and fifty-five, and of all other acts amendatory thereof ratified January 29, 1869." Laws of North Carolina, 1868-1869, ch. 20, p. 61. (Raleigh: M. S. Littlefield, State Printer and Binder, 1869.)

Part and used it as such. He was directly responsible for the choice of Swepson as president of the Western Division and of Littlefield who succeeded to that position.<sup>5</sup>

Swepson and Littlefield quickly organized the new division, freezing out bona fide would-be stock subscribers and electing Swepson president. Through fraudulent stock subscriptions, they convinced Holden that all prerequisites had been met and received \$6,367,000 worth of special tax bonds in payment of the state's subscription for two-thirds of the capital stock of the Company and for construction of the railroad.

Soutter and Company, the state's fiscal agents in New York City, sold bonds for Swepson and Littlefield at an average of fifty-three cents on the dollar. The net proceeds of the sale of these bonds amounted to \$1,287,036.03. By far, the larger part of this sum was misappropriated by Swepson, a very small portion of it being used in making a pretense of beginning the construction of the railroad.<sup>6</sup>

The Eastern Division of the railroad, under more sober and honest management, used most of its proceeds from its \$613,000 in state bonds for legitimate construction purposes. However, of the amount appropriated for the Eastern Division, \$80,000 was spent in the construction of a branch line to some lime beds in Catawba County, partly owned by Dr. John J. Mott, the president of the Eastern Division.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Governor William W. Holden was impeached. One of the nine charges against him was his involvement with the corrupt dealings of the Western North Carolina Railroad. This charge was adopted by a vote of 74 to 9 and disappeared from view, with neither the journal nor the press ever mentioning it again. Joseph G. de Roulhac Hamilton, Reconstruction in North Carolina (New York: Columbia University, Longmans, Green and Company, 1914), 550. Hereinafter cited as Hamilton, Reconstruction.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 436.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 437.

In March, 1870, the General Assembly took steps to recover what Swepson had misappropriated by appointing a commission to investigate all of his affairs in connection with the expenditure of the Western Division's money and to salvage whatever could be found. This commission, chaired by Nicholas W. Woodfin of Asheville, met Swepson and Littlefield in mid-April, 1870, to make a settlement with them.

On May 23, 1870, the directors held a meeting at Warm Springs, North Carolina, passing a resolution declaring these investments were made without the authority of the stockholders or directors and solely as Swepson's private investments. Littlefield's presidency of the Western Division was terminated.<sup>8</sup>

From 1870 until 1880, numerous lawsuits involving Swepson's investments appeared in North Carolina courts. Some of the continuing litigation was reported as late as 1881 in Thomas J. Jarvis' report to the General Assembly:

During the administration of Governor Caldwell, an indictment was found in Wake superior court against George W. Swepson and M. S. Littlefield for obtaining the bonds of the State under false pretenses. A farce of a trial was had before Judge John Watts, and, in the absence of the defendents, he ordered a verdict of 'not guilty' to be entered, and the state appealed. The appeal, after being in the supreme court a long time, was finally decided against the defendents, during the administration of Governor Vance, who employed counsel to prosecute the case. This case has twice since been to the supreme court on collateral questions, and both times the decisions have been in favor of the state. Having given you this information as to the origin and progress of the case, I forbear to make any remarks upon

<sup>8</sup>Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the Western Division of the Western North Carolina Rail-Road Company, Together with the Reports of the President, Chief Engineer, and Treasurer, at Asheville, N. C., November 1, 1870. p. 12 (Salisbury: J. J. Bruner, Printer, 1870).

it except to express the hope that it may soon be brought to fair and impartial trial upon the merits of the case without any further unnecessary delays.

The Eastern Division received only \$273,000 of the special tax bonds; but between 1865 and 1869 it received other state bonds issued in pursuance of the provisions of its original charter passed in 1855, making a grand total of \$2,836,000. The cash proceeds of these bonds amounted to \$1,246,000. Early in 1869, the Eastern Division completed construction to Old Fort.

To fulfill its obligations to build the railroad to Asheville, the Company was forced by lack of funds in 1870 to issue mortgage bonds to the extent of \$850,000. However, unable to meet the interest on these bonds, it was thrown into receivership in 1872.<sup>10</sup>

When the panic of 1873 came, the Western North Carolina Railroad was faced with bankruptcy, reorganization, and change of ownership before construction could proceed. The problem of the Western North Carolina Railroad endangered the entire retrenchment program of the Democratic Party. Since 1870, the state had not only ceased to subsidize railroad construction; it had also leased the state-owned North Carolina Railroad to a syndicate of northern and Virginia capitalists. But the Western North Carolina Railroad constituted a unique problem. The development of the western part of the state, as well as the railroad connection of the state with the Mississippi Valley, depended upon its completion.

On February 10, 1873, the United States Circuit Court for Western North Carolina appointed Samuel McDowell Tate Temporary receiver; but he held the post for only two months before the court replaced him with the

<sup>9</sup>Wilfred Buck Yearns (ed.), The Papers of Thomas Jordan Jarvis, Volume I, 1869-1882, (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1969) 324. Hereinafter cited as "Yearns, Papers of Jarvis."

<sup>10</sup>Robert D. W. Conner, North Carolina--Rebuilding an Ancient Commonwealth, 1584-1925, 4 volumes. (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1929.) II, 372. Hereinafter cited as "Conner, An Ancient Commonwealth."

president of the North Carolina Railroad, the wealthy businessman William A. Smith.

On January 12, 1875, Smith reported his actions as reciever:

In the month of April, 1873, I was appointed Receiver of the Western North Carolina Railroad by the Circuit Court of the U. S. of the Western District of N. C. All the indebtedness of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company was contracted previous to my appointment as such Receiver. During my possession and control of the property, I have paid all debts contracted by me as Receiver, and have now in my hands a large surplus derived from the earnings of the road.<sup>11</sup>

In 1875, Governor Curtis Hooks Brogden, Senate president Robert F. Armfield, and House Speaker James L. Robinson were appointed commissioners to buy the railroad under a decree of the United States Circuit Court, for not over \$50,000, to issue bonds for that amount, and to complete the Paint Rock and Murphy branches. This act, ratified March 13, 1875, gave the commissioners authority to purchase claims against the Western North Carolina Railroad Company which might be necessary to secure for the state a clear title to the Railroad, other property, and the franchise of the Company.<sup>12</sup>

The Western North Carolina Railroad was sold on June 22, 1875. Augustus Summerfield Merrimon as agent for the state purchased it for the state for the sum of \$825,000. The state paid this sum to the railroad's creditors by executing a mortgage for that amount upon the property itself and issuing through the commissioners appointed to make the purchase mortgage bonds for that amount to be due in 1890 and bearing seven percent interest. The interest was guaranteed by making the coupons receivable for taxes due the state; but North Carolina did not bind herself to pay the principal.

<sup>11</sup>Executive and Legislative Documents, 1874-1875, ch. 15, p. 34. (Raleigh: Josiah Turner, Jr., State Printer and Binder, 1875).

<sup>12</sup>Thomas D. Carter, The Western North Carolina Railroad In Litigation (Washington, D. C., n.p., 1882), 18.



The act of 1875 completely revised the board of directors. Three commissioners, as the directors were called in the new act, were to be appointed by Governor Brogden, subject to the approval of the state senate. After being apportioned one-fourth of the reorganized stock, the private stockholders could meet and elect a fourth commissioner who would join the state-appointed three as an equal. The act of 1875 required all four of the commissioners to make bond payable to the state in an amount not less than the net earnings of the railroad for the preceding year. They were also to keep financial accounts of all earnings, incomes, and expenses of the railroad and were directed to make semi-annual reports to the governor of these accounts, along with the activities of management of construction. The new act also barred from the board any person who had had connections with any fraudulent actions pertaining to railroads or other public works in the state.

The act of 1875, however, did not specify that the president must be a member of the board of directors, leaving the choice of officers completely to the four men.<sup>13</sup>

Governor Brogden's appointees were William W. Rollins, a tobacco grower and Republican politician from Marshall, Madison County; William S. Pearson of the Asheville Pioneer, a Republican newspaper; and William P. Canady, a Republican who became mayor of Wilmington through the votes of its Negro majority after the war. In October, Brogden's appointees were joined by the fourth commissioner, Samuel McDowell Tate, who had been elected by the private stockholders.

These commissioners were to manage the railroad for the next 18 months. William W. Rollins was called president, William P. Canady

<sup>13</sup>Public Laws of North Carolina, 1874-1875, ch. 23, p. 174. (Raleigh: Josiah Turner, Jr., State Printer and Binder, 1875).

Vice-president, William S. Pearson, master of transportation, and J. M. Tate was the superintendent.<sup>14</sup>

As the new commissioners took control of the railroad, they scored several advances. Since they could use only a portion of the railroad's earnings for construction, they searched for outside aid. Canady secured a loan of three miles of iron from Wilmington businessmen to extend the railroad to the foot of the Black Mountains. By mid-winter, a few convicts were arriving at the construction camps, and the commissioners hired a chief engineer. They secured the services of James W. Wilson, a former mathematics instructor at the state university and a Confederate veteran, to work convict labor in crossing the mountains. As there were not enough prisoners for the projects, Rollins went to court to force the Penitentiary Board to supply the number of convicts provided for by the act of 1875. Hampered by lack of funds, the commissioners nevertheless made construction gains through the winter and spring of 1876.<sup>15</sup>

The management by commission was the subject of a legislative inquiry in December, 1876. A resolution was passed stating that:

a committee of two on the part of the Senate and three on the part of the House of Representatives be appointed forthwith to proceed to examine and investigate the work now going on on said road, how the same is being done, the management of the convicts, and also to examine the books, records, and papers of said road and to report to the General Assembly all this information, of any kind whatever, which said committee shall deem necessary to a full and complete understanding of the operations of said road and the work done thereon, in pursuance of the act in relation to the Western North Carolina Railroad ratified the 13th day of March, 1875.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1876-1877, ch. 30, pp. 2, 14. (Raleigh: Josiah Turner, Public Printer and Binder, 1877).

<sup>15</sup>David M. Holcombe, "The Western North Carolina Railroad and the State Democrats, An Era of Changing Philosophy," (Unpublished master's thesis, Wake Forest University, 1966), pp. 36-37. Hereinafter cited as Holcombe, "The Western North Carolina Railroad."

<sup>16</sup>Public Laws of North Carolina, 1876-1877, ch. 138, p. 156 (Raleigh: Josiah Turner, Public Printer and Binder, 1877).

David M. Holcombe in his Wake Forest master's thesis, "The Western North Carolina Railroad and the State Democrats, An Era of Changing Philosophy,"<sup>17</sup> wrote that the study of the Investigation Committee was dominated by politics and its conclusions were predetermined. William C. Troy, its chairman, charged that the railroad had an indiscriminate system of free passes, which the management gave with no requirement that the recipient have a connection with the line. This charge, along with others, was refuted in statements of witnesses, but the committee ignored their testimony. Troy stated that the \$5,704.54 which William Rollins had reported in agents' hands was correct, except that the agents involved had fled with the money. He did not add that the agents were bonded and that Rollins had started court actions to recover the money.

Troy ridiculed as unjustified the salaries paid to the officers of the railroad. He did not compare them to those paid to the officers of other railroads in the state. He made much of the hotel at Henry, three miles west of Old Fort, which the railroad had helped to build. Witnesses' testimony as to the relative value of the aid given was ignored, as was testimony as to the necessity of the inn as a way station for the line.<sup>17</sup>

Rollins was charged with incompetence and corruption and was removed from office for political rather than actual crimes. Troy failed to report on some of Rollins' suggestions for improving the railroad. He suggested that the state create a statutory lien on the property of the road to create funds for continued construction. He asked that the state put the entire convict population to work on the railroad, under the control of agents on the railroad, not the penal board. He requested the General

<sup>17</sup> Holcombe, "The Western North Carolina Railroad," pp. 46-49.

Assembly to consider the purchase of steel rails, since they were preferable to iron and their price was low enough to realize a good savings.<sup>18</sup>

The committee's recommendations were followed by the Act of February 19, 1877, which stated that the railroad be operated by a board of directors and that an appropriation be made for buying iron. The railroad was to be a corporation whose affairs would be managed by twelve directors. The capital stock was fixed at \$850,000. The number of convicts employed on the railroad was to be 500, and an appropriation of \$70,000 per year was made to buy iron. Authority was given to change the direction of the railroad at Newton, to dispense with the branch which had previously been operated into that town.<sup>19</sup>

This measure was passed without dissent, with support from the East and West, for the West carried the balance of power in the General Assembly. William C. Troy and Lieutenant Governor Thomas Jordan Jarvis led this movement. As a reward the East received a new county government act passed on February 27, 1877, with the aid of a majority under control of the General Assembly, and effectively removed the Negro from a position of political power.<sup>20</sup>

The Democrats praised the reorganization of the railroad in 1877 as a statesmanlike move, but its affairs were further clouded by a seemingly infinite variety of personal and group jealousies and dissensions. In the excitement to have a railroad built into the mountains, each group and faction wanted to receive credit for the accomplishment.

In March, the General Assembly passed two acts to aid the Western North Carolina Railroad. One, on March 8, authorized the railroad's directors to spend a portion of the \$70,000 state appropriation for

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, A State Movement, 225.

<sup>20</sup> Holcombe, "The Western North Carolina Railroad," p. 55.

operating expenses if necessary. The other established a bidding agency through which western contractors could build bridges for the railroad, with the state paying a toll of eight percent per year on investment and maintenance.<sup>21</sup> The long climb up the mountains and into Asheville could now be started again.

<sup>21</sup>Public Laws of North Carolina, 1879, ch. 262, p. 429, (Raleigh: Ashe and Gatling, State Printers and Binders, 1879).

## Chapter IV

### The Western North Carolina Railroad Opens Up Western North Carolina 1876-1882

While Old Fort was the terminus of the railroad, 1869-1876, there was only one train a day each way. This was a mixed freight and passenger train, consisting of five or six freight cars and one dilapidated passenger coach at the rear. This so-called passenger coach had a partition across its center--the front compartment being second-class, while the rear was for first-class passengers. First-class and second-class tickets were sold, first-class costing one cent per mile more than second class. There were turn-tables at Old Fort and Salisbury, where the locomotives were turned around. But the passenger coach was not turned. It therefore followed that the rear end when going west was first-class, but when going east the same compartment was second-class. This mixed train service was very poor. Liquor was sold everywhere at that time, and the railroad management put no restrictions on liquor drinking by any of the employees.<sup>1</sup>

As an example of the activity about Hickory Tavern (modern Hickory), the following produce was shipped from the train depot during a twelve-month period in the early 1870's: butter, 18,170 pounds; bacon, 16,898 pounds; apples (green), 253 barrels; oats, 879 bushels; rye, 637 bushels; corn, 6,886 bushels; flour, 198 sacks; dried fruit and berries, 215,430 pounds; roots and herbs, 168,286 pounds; salt, 300 sacks; and chestnuts, onions, potatoes, flax seed and other miscellaneous articles, 300,000 pounds.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Charles J. Preslar, Jr. (ed.), A History of Catawba County, (Salisbury, N. C.: Rowan Printing Company, 1954), 170. Hereinafter cited as Preslar, History of Catawba County.

<sup>2</sup>Charlotte (North Carolina), Western Democrat, January 18, 1872.

An 1875 railroad schedule exists for the two trains. The Western train left Salisbury at 7 a.m.; arrived at Statesville 8:15 a.m.; left Hickory, 11:50 a.m.; arrived at Morganton, 1:11 p.m.; arrived at Old Fort, 3:25 p.m.

The eastern timetable had a similar schedule. It took approximately the same time for the trip going east.<sup>3</sup>

Directions were given for the meeting of the trains as follows: Trains passed at Catawba at 9:55 a.m. If the up train was behind time, the down train would wait thirty minutes and proceed, running thirty minutes behind time, till the up train was met and passed. If both trains were behind time, the train bound east would have the right to the road indefinitely, as against the west bound train; and the train bound west would wait on the siding till the east bound train passed.<sup>4</sup>

At Old Fort a stagecoach, drawn by six beautiful white horses and driven by Jack Pence, met trains and conveyed the passengers over the crest of the Blue Ridge to Asheville.

On February 1, 1877, a contract was given to James W. Wilson and Company of Morganton for completing the Swannanoa and Burgin tunnels, involving the removal of 15,954 cubic yards of material, most of which was solid rock. The price was \$2 per yard. Lester E. Rice was given the contract for finishing High Ridge and Lick Log tunnels, involving the removal of 6,778 cubic yards of rock. Leonard S. Aldrich was given the contract for building the western approach to the Swannanoa Tunnel. By the end of 1877, Wilson had done about a fourth of his work, Rice nearly half of his, and Aldrich a third of his.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>A complete timetable for the Western train and the Eastern train can be found in Presler's History of Catawba County, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup>Preslar, History of Catawba County, 171.

<sup>5</sup>Brown, A State Movement, 224.

The majority of this work was done by convict labor. "An Act to Authorize the Hire of Convict Labor In or Outside the State's Prison, and to Regulate the Same" was passed on March 22, 1875. This act served as a general guide-in the disposition of convict labor during the 1870's and the 1880's. The Board of Directors of the State Penitentiary was to retain full control of the convicts in all disciplinary matters. The convicts had to labor for the contractors an average of ten hours a day during the year, Sundays and national holidays excepted. No person was to be held liable for the escape or mistreatment of any convict unless proof of gross negligence or maltreatment was secured. The superintendent of the work gave the prison officials a receipt for each convict, which gave the name, offense, and date of beginning and end of his term. The value of the labor done by the convicts was to be charged against the railroad by the state treasurer after deducting the average cost of maintenance.<sup>6</sup> This new source of labor was to construct the railroad over the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The new board of directors took over in April, 1877. Major James W. Wilson, president of James W. Wilson and Company, and a former Confederate officer, was made president, superintendent, and chief engineer and was optimistic in his plans to push construction from Henry Station, a few miles above Old Fort, to Asheville.<sup>7</sup> At Asheville the railroad was to divide, one branch leading down the French Broad Valley to Paint Rock, and the other crossing southwestern North Carolina to Ducktown, Tennessee.

<sup>6</sup> Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1874-1875, ch. 246, 329. (Raleigh: Josiah Turner, Jr., State Printer and Binder, 1875).

<sup>7</sup> North Carolina, who as Burke County's representative in the 1877 legislature to organize the railroad, had been involved with the line since 1875. He was also a member of the mathematics faculty of the University of North Carolina. See, "The Western North Carolina Railroad." p. 53.



But the Blue Ridge Mountains loomed over the Henry-Asheville section, and Wilson faced perplexing construction problems. He proposed to climb the mountain by following stream beds and cutting six tunnels to reach the crest, only 3.4 miles above the last stages of completed construction.

Work on the mountain grade had practically ceased from 1872 to 1876, and the work done during this period barely compensated for the damage done by weather conditions and the growth of underbrush. Some of the roadbed had been practically destroyed. One tunnel had caved in and had to be made into an open cut. Originally, a loop over itself was a part of the line; but Major Wilson relocated the roadbed to eliminate this feature and save money. The rugged nature of the mountainside made progress extremely slow.

During the first year of this operation, 1875, 300 male and 16 female convicts, were employed. They preformed 80,309 days of work, 52,030 days of which went on construction. The cash value of their work was put at \$51,055 or about 98.17 cents per day per worker. During the first year, four were killed, twenty-two died of disease and other ailments, fourteen escaped, and thirty were released upon completion of their terms.<sup>8</sup>

These convicts worked on the major obstacle to the railroad, the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge. The sharp ascent was 1,100 vertical feet in three miles. This ascent, which amounts to seven vertical feet every one hundred feet, was overcome by so-called development, meaning using a long twisting, curving line and sometimes looping back upon itself sufficiently to get enough distance to obtain the required grade which was about 2.2 feet per 100 feet. By such means, 786 vertical feet were overcome in 7 1/2 miles. The remaining 314 vertical feet were of lesser

<sup>8</sup> Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1876-1877, ch. 106, pp. 166-168. (Raleigh: The News Publishing Company, State Printer and Binder, 1877).

grades extending to Old Fort approximately fifteen miles from the summit, via the track, or 5 3/4 miles via air line. To negotiate this rise on practicable gradients, it was found necessary to locate a circuitous route with a total curvature of 2,776.4 degrees, advantage being taken of the stream courses to secure a graded rise. It was necessary to cut six tunnels: Swannanoa, 1,800 feet; Lick Log, 562 feet; High Ridge, 451 feet; Burgin, 252 feet; Jarrett's, 125 feet; and McElroy, 89 feet. The extent to which the line winds around is indicated by the fact that between mile posts 113 and 122, nine miles by rail, the air line distance is only 3.4 miles, 891.5 feet of the rise being between the two points. At one point, the road winds around an isolated spur and crosses again the same culvert 120 feet above the first crossing; at another point, by a similar loop, it runs 50 feet above the curve. On the west, it descends along the Swannanoa Valley by an easy grade. Between the crest and Dendron, the road descends 786 feet in a 7.5 mile stretch of track.<sup>9</sup>

By November 1, 1877, 430 convicts worked an average of 7,746 days per month. For the year 1877, 42 escaped, 30 died, 4 were killed, and 99 were either discharged or pardoned.<sup>10</sup> The convicts were kept in stockades along the route up the mountain from Henry Station to Swannanoa Gap. With a pick and a shovel one convict could move 2 1/2 to 3 cubic yards of earth in 8 hours. The convicts went to work at daybreak and quit at dusk. Food was brought to them on the job. The standard food was navy beans and corn bread. For Sunday breakfast there was the luxury of biscuits. Sometimes there was fat pork, cabbage, potatoes, and black-eyed peas. Blackstrap

<sup>9</sup>Hinton R. Helper, Western North Carolina, Nature's Trundle-Bed of Recuperation (New York: The South Publishing Company, 1886), 18-19.

<sup>10</sup>Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1877, No. 8, 21. (Raleigh: The News Publishing Company, State Printer and Binder, 1877).

relashes was a treat. Six and one-quarter cents per day was the average allowance to feed a convict. This left little room except for the bare necessities.

On the mountain section, the convicts were distributed as follows: at the top (Swannanoa Gap), 130; Middle Quarters, 119; and at Round Knob, 122. Besides tunnelling and grading, the convicts were employed in building their stockades and the headquarters of Henry M. Miller, supervisor of convicts. In each of the stockades, 17 or 20 cooked and cut wood.

Dr. William A. Collett, the State Physician for the convicts, visited the stockades daily, except days when no convicts were sick enough to require attention. He reported to the General Assembly on December 28, 1876, that the physical condition and health of the convicts was comparatively very good. He also noted that the convicts worked by the contractors were pushed more vigorously than those worked by the State.

Guards were paid \$13 per month on the mountain compared with the \$25 per month paid to prison guards in Raleigh. The cost of keeping convicts was greater in Raleigh than on the mountain section, and thus the state was saving money. Negro captains, foremen, and guards were often employed. Each guard was responsible for 10 to 12 men; and a walking boss, who ranked next to the chief engineer as far as the convicts were concerned, was in overall charge. The convicts were further divided into tree gangs, chopping gangs, and digging gangs.

On Saturday afternoon, work stopped at 4 o'clock and the prisoners were required to take a bath and change clothes. On Saturday night and Sunday, there was often much gaiety in the camp. Music, singing, and banjo picking were enjoyed. Visitors often came in from the neighborhood and listened to the performances.

Nearly all Negroes, the convicts had been transported for the most part from the eastern section of the state. Since they were from a warmer

climate, the harsh mountain climate and an unvaried diet made pneumonia the scourge of the camp.<sup>11</sup>

"An Act to Provide for the Speedy Completion of the Western North Carolina Railroad and to Amend an Act entitled an Act in relation to the Western North Carolina Railroad" was passed on February 19, 1877. It stated that the warden of the penitentiary should send to the president of the railroad all convicts who had not been farmed out. The convicts were to number at least 500, but could not exceed that number until other roads had been supplied with labor. They were to do a reasonable amount of work each day. The state was to continue supervision, control and management of all convicts. The Superintendent of the State Penitentiary was required to guard, feed, clothe, and doctor them. Any superior court judge could sentence and order convicts to work on the railroad. The board of directors of the Penitentiary was to make quarterly reports to the Governor, showing the number of convicts, the method of management, the amount of labor they had performed, and an estimate of its value. On reaching Asheville, the convicts were to be divided into two equal groups or corps, one working on the branch to Paint Rock and the other working on the line running toward Murphy. When the Paint Rock branch was completed, all the convicts were to be placed on the Murphy line.<sup>12</sup>

Wilson spent the summer and fall of 1877 completing one important step in the crossing. A stage road snaked its way for the ten miles across the mountains, and Wilson decided that an engine should be taken over this route to the valley of Eagle Rock on the other side of the

<sup>11</sup>Wilma Dykeman, The French Broad, (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), 163. Hereinafter cited as Dykeman, The French Broad.

<sup>12</sup>Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1876-1877, ch. 106, 169-170. (Raleigh: The News Publishing Company, State Printer and Binder, 1877).

mountain. From there the engine could haul supplies and laborers from the Swannanoa Valley to the construction. He secured oxen and mules from throughout Western North Carolina. But the main force was not animals but state-leased convicts. Driven by whips as were the mules linked with them, some 300 men pulled the locomotive up the stage trail, laying track in front of it and picking it up when the engine had passed. They crossed the ranges to be tunneled. By November, Wilson had his engine across the mountains.<sup>13</sup>

Nitroglycerine was being used here as an explosive for the first time in the Southeastern United States. An engineer named James Cambar was credited with being the first man to use an explosive other than black powder in the Blue Ridge. Mixing nitroglycerine with sawdust and corn meal until he had a thick mash, Cambar poured this dough into drilled holes and then attached caps and fuses. Eventually he devised sticks of dynamite by rolling the paste into oil paper cartridges and running them into holes with loading poles.

The bore itself required blasting. Holes were driven as deep as practicable (generally not more than two feet) using steel tipped bars and sledge hammers. Powder was poured into them. Similarly, primed reeds, projecting from the drilling and tamped home with earth, served as primitive fuses. To give the men time to seek shelter, a line of leaves or straw twelve or fifteen feet long was strung to points of contact with the tubes and set ablaze.<sup>14</sup>

At one time, 1,455 men, 403 boys, 560 carts, 50 wagons, 780 horses and mules, and 44 oxen were employed on the railroad. By August 14, 1878,

<sup>13</sup>Salisbury (North Carolina) Watchman, November 22, 1877; Holcombe, "Western North Carolina Railroad," 54.

<sup>14</sup>Herbert G. Monroe, "Rails Across the Blue Ridge," in Railroad Magazine (June, 1949), 17.

the railroad was close to a place known as the Mud Cut located three miles above Henry Station. Excavating a passage through one of the sharp promontories of the mountain, the workmen had drilled through hard rock and removed nearly 80,000 cubic yards, when a great slide occurred. One hundred and ten thousand cubic yards of soft rock foundation rolled down in a thunder of devastation and wiped out all signs of human labor at that spot. Luckily there were no casualties from the landslide. The loose earth, soaked by rains, became a jellylike mass; in addition, mud seemed to boil up from under the tracks. Sometimes in the mornings, the level of the tracks was raised as much as twenty feet higher than it had been the night before. The clearing of Mud Cut was back-breaking work. Time and again areas of Mud Cut would be cleared up only to fill up almost as if the mud gushed up through springs underneath the ground. This hazard was finally made passable by a system of California sluicing that brought by ditch and trough a mountain stream to a point 200 feet above the cut and discharged this steady stream upon the loose earth continuously. In mid-October, 1879, rain swept through the mountains raising streams to their highest level in 40 years. The embankments and open cuts of the railroad ran with water and Mud Cut collapsed again. Thousands of cubic yards of mud poured into the open trench, delaying work trains for weeks. The railroad officials pressed wagons and stages into service, again climbing the torturous road over Ridgecrest.<sup>15</sup>

This delay at Mud Cut resulted in the publishing of a circular called the "Mud Cut Boom." It was written by Walter Clark, a Raleigh lawyer, newspaper owner, and rising star in the Democratic Party, who was the voice of retrenchment and reform in state government. He criticized the railroad as wasteful, sectional, corrupt, and unnecessary. Charging

<sup>15</sup> Asheville (North Carolina) Citizen, October 30, 1879.

that \$2,000,000 in state funds had been used to bring the railroad from Henry to Asheville, a distance of 28 miles, Clark pointed out that once there, it would meet the privately-owned Spartanburg and Asheville Railroad, which had been built at no cost to the state. The only benefit in continuing the railroad from Henry Station to Asheville had been to give holders of state-issued mortgage bonds more miles of rails to foreclose. Clark believed that the cost of the railroad would exceed in value all the property west of Asheville. Lieutenant Governor Thomas Jordan Jarvis did not like the circular. He explained:

I do not apprehend much trouble from it. The statements in the circular are so false in fact that when the truth is told I do not apprehend that many votes will be effected by it. I have great confidence in the good judgement of our people and they are not to be moved about by every wind of doctrine. The Western North Carolina Railroad must be built through to Paint Rock so as to make connections with the great west at as early a day as possible.<sup>16</sup>

Peter M. Hale, editor of the daily Fayetteville Observer and of Hale's Weekly, answered Clark's charges with quotations from financial sources, Democratic speakers, and the president of the Spartanburg and Asheville Railroad. Hale concluded that only the Western North Carolina Railroad could open Western North Carolina and only the state could build it.<sup>17</sup>

In compliance with the act passed February 19, 1877, convicts were sent to the railroad until their number reached 558 on November 1, 1878. Many were moved from the Spartanburg and Asheville Railroad to the Western North Carolina Railroad in August of 1877, when the former line failed to meet its quarterly payments for convict labor.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Yeans, Papers of Jarvis, p. 324.

<sup>17</sup>Holcombe, "Western North Carolina Railroad," 70.

<sup>18</sup>Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1876-1877, ch. 8 34. (Raleigh: Ashe & Gatling, State Printers and Binders, 1879).

In February, 1879, a committee sent by the governor to investigate conditions among the convicts, reported to the General Assembly. The committee stated that on February 1, 1879, there were 604 convicts on the railroad working as follows: 63 on the work at Newton, 130 at Round Knob, 67 at Long Branch Quarters, 107 at Lick Log Quarters, 138 at Swannanoa Gap.

The committee reported that the convicts were not required to perform sufficient hard labor. This was a result of the dual control by the prison and the railroad. Refractory convicts were sent back to quarters and punished by state officials; but company authorities believed that punishment on the spot, before the rest of the convicts, would curb rebelliousness and increase the volume of labor. In some cases an overseer of a squad served also as the guard and thus destroyed his efficiency in both capacities. Living conditions were fair except for exposure to severe weather conditions while at work.

Dr. Henry F. Burgin, physician for the convicts, reported their quarters were cleaned and limed every morning. There was a good deal of sickness during the winter of 1878, due mostly to exposure, but no large epidemic occurred.<sup>19</sup>

Convict labor was often wasted because of human error. Thomas H. Allen, in charge of the tunneling at High Ridge, went off tangent in digging a great hole in the tunnel upon the left hand side going east about 150 feet. This miscalculation necessitated much additional excavation when finally the proper course was laid out.

The most costly engineering feat in the whole crossing of the mountains was the boring of the 1,800-foot Swannanoa Tunnel. Work was

<sup>19</sup>Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1879, ch. 7, 27. (Raleigh: Ashe & Gatling, State Printers and Binders, 1879).



repeatedly hindered by cave-ins and the dangers of contracting respiratory infections. The boring itself proved to be laborious, as all of the drilling was done by hand. The blasting was done with old style black powder and nitroglycerine, and all of the debris had to be removed by hand. The tunnel was bored from both ends, and the two crews met on May 11, 1879.

The final cave-in occurred at Swannanoa Tunnel just after Wilson had dispatched his victory telegram to Governor Vance. Twenty-one men, including a convict guard, were crushed to death. The construction of the nine miles of ties and rails that connected points separated by an air line distance of only 3.4 miles and by a difference in altitude of 891.5 feet cost North Carolina \$2,000,000 and the lives of 125 men.

The official tunnel opening was a great occasion attended by railroad representatives and other prominent citizens. The newspapers published favorable reports of the event. The news that Major Wilson completed the laying of the track through Swannanoa Tunnel was hailed with delight by the people of Western North Carolina. For the last two decades these people had been anxiously looking for results, and now they felt that the strong barrier between them and the outside world was at last pulled down.<sup>20</sup>

By 1879, changes in technology were being evidenced on the railroad. Until 1879, the locomotives had been wood burners. Wood was purchased from farmers along the line and piled at convenient points. When fuel ran low, the train stopped at a supply, and the train crew filled the tender. The wood burners were changed to coal burners in 1879.<sup>21</sup>

With the Swannanoa Tunnel completed and the way open into Asheville the Democrats, under Governor Jarvis, decided to sell the railroad. However,

<sup>20</sup>Dykeman, The French Broad, 163; Asheville (North Carolina) Citizen, May 12, 1879.

<sup>21</sup>Preslar, History of Catawba County, 170.

past Asheville the railroad's future lay enmeshed in a separate corporation, the Western Division of the Western North Carolina Railroad, a result of the Swepson fraud. Governor Jarvis decided to consolidate the Eastern and Western Divisions of the railroad. The president of the Western Division, which existed as a railroad only on paper and in some court litigations, was William W. Rollins. Rollins believed the interest of the Western Division stockholders was being sacrificed by the state, and he postponed union of the two lines as long as possible. Governor Jarvis applied financial pressure to the railroad directors to hasten their absorption of the Western Division. Believing that Rollins was delaying the merger of his company, Jarvis told the railroad directors that the state would withhold all funds until the consolidation was effected.<sup>22</sup> On March 13, 1879, the General Assembly repealed all laws continuing the Western Division of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company and turned over all of the rights and powers of that firm to the Eastern Division.

The State of North Carolina did not intend to carry on the operation of the line forever, but announced that the property was for sale to anyone who would agree to carry out the original plan. The lease of the North Carolina Railroad to the Richmond and Danville Company in 1871 had already raised the question of the wisdom of the state's continuing the immensely expensive task of trying to carry the Western North Carolina Railroad across the mountains.<sup>23</sup>

Unless construction was carried out as far as the Tennessee state line, there could be no expectation of a profitable traffic. The General Assembly had to decide whether to strain the resources of the state to

<sup>22</sup>Holcombe, "Western North Carolina Railroad," 67.

<sup>23</sup>Conner, An Ancient Commonwealth, p. 373.

complete the project or to effect a complete reversal of the old policy of state aid to internal improvements. Eastern North Carolinians complained that the state was wasting money in building a railroad through the poor mountain counties. Landslides had covered the roadbeds as soon as they were cut around mountainsides, and costs had become alarming. Meanwhile, the directors of the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad clamored for the railroad to be completed and link their line to the Atlantic Ocean.

Word was spread through the northern financial centers that the railroad was for sale, and in mid-January, 1880, William J. Best, James D. Fish, J. Nelson Tappan, and William R. Grace, four wealthy New Yorkers, made a tentative offer to buy the railroad and complete it. Their plan was to buy the Western North Carolina Railroad and link it to the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Line, and thus form a through line from Beaufort, North Carolina to Tennessee.<sup>24</sup>

Public opinion was sharply divided on the question and the deciding factor was the favorable attitude of Governor Jarvis. He knew that to sell the railroad meant to divorce the state from internal improvements and direct her energies to the education of her children. He determined on a policy of letting private capital and enterprise build the railroad and let the state take up those things which belonged more particularly to the functions of state government.<sup>25</sup>

Those who favored the sale maintained that only a syndicate of outside capitalists could command enough resources to complete the railroad in the near future, that careful attention to the details of the

<sup>24</sup>Yearns, Papers of Jarvis, xxxii.

<sup>25</sup>Conner, An Ancient Commonwealth, 374.

contract would safeguard the state's interests, and that the sale would remove the railroad from politics. Many opposed it, saying that the state would be selling a valuable asset for a small sum, that the new owners would direct their traffic toward Virginia rather than North Carolina, that the long term value of the railroad would warrant any sacrifice by the state to complete it, and that the Best contract contained insufficient guarantees that it would be built or managed properly.<sup>26</sup>

The board of directors of the railroad advised against the sale. The Council of State advised an immediate special session of the General Assembly, and on February 12, Jarvis called an extra session for March 15 to consider the matter. Zebulon B. Vance, Robert Brank Vance, Robert Franklin, Matthew W. Ransom, Alfred M. Scales, and John J. Davis all supported the call for a special session. On January 13, Jarvis wrote Best that the state must demand that Best place a deposit of \$30,000 in the Citizens National Bank in Raleigh for the following reasons: first, if the General Assembly rejected Best's proposition, the deposit was to be subject immediately to Best's order; second, if the Assembly adopted his proposition and he failed to close the contract or purchase as agreed upon, the Treasurer of the state would apply the deposit to the payment of the expenses of the Session; third, if the proposition was adopted and closed, the deposit was to remain as a further security.

On February 12, 1880, Samuel James Ervin, a Morganton lawyer, reported that the Burke County people favored selling. Alfred D. Brooks of Statesville wrote Jarvis on the same day that his travels in Western North Carolina had revealed the universal sentiment of the people for the sale.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Yearn, Papers of Jarvis, xxxii.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 167-169.

On March 18, 1880, Governor Jarvis reported to the General Assembly that, had the net earnings been used to keep up the old part of the railroad, they would have been wholly insufficient. They would not even have paid off the company's floating debt. Jarvis speculated that the total gross earnings for the next two years would not be sufficient to repair and equip that part of the railroad already in operation. If the state continued to own the railroad, the state would have to look elsewhere for the means necessary to keep the railroad in proper running order. Jarvis stated that unless taxes were increased, the construction of the railroad must be stopped.<sup>28</sup>

Jarvis could think of only three ways to complete the railroad if the state continued to own it: first, to issue more state bonds, which he believed was inadmissible; second, to further mortgage the property, which in his opinion would inevitably lead to another foreclosure and sale; third, to increase taxes, which would be intolerable.<sup>29</sup>

In the debate over the sale of the line, Judge Augustus S. Merrimon opposed the proposed sale. Judge Thomas Ruffin, Jr. replied to Merrimon, fully explaining the provisions of the bill and the proposed new state policy. George Davis then delivered an able speech supporting the sale. The bill authorizing the sale of the state's interest in the railroad was passed on March 26, 1880, by a vote of 89 to 21 in the House and 40 to 6 in the Senate. Of the 27 men in the General Assembly who voted against the measure, only two lived in counties through which the railroad ran. Only two other opponents lived west of a line drawn from Greensboro to Charlotte.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1880, Special Session, no. 2, 2-5, (Raleigh: Ashe & Gatling, State Printers and Binders, 1880).

<sup>29</sup> Yearns, Papers of Jarvis, 209-211.

<sup>30</sup> Conner, An Ancient Commonwealth, 376.

After Best had signed the contract, he was to reorganize the railroad into a new company, again entitled the "Western North Carolina Railroad." The new owners would pay the state an amount that equalled the state's expenses on the railroad since 1875. Payments to the state would be made in three steps. First, the new owners would assume the state's mortgage of \$850,000, incurred when the state bought the road, and pay the interest on the bonds regularly falling due. Second, the new owners would pay \$30,000 in cash for the state's current floating debt on the road. Third, when the new owners created a further mortgage and issued new bonds, they would deliver \$520,000 worth of bonds to the state.

The act provided fairly specific provisions toward getting the railroad built. The new company had to begin work by May 29, 1880, two months after the ratification of the act. For construction the state would provide five hundred convicts. In turn, the company had to pay \$125 for each convict per year. The act stipulated that the company had to complete the Ducktown branch as far as the Pigeon River, about 20 miles, and totally finish the Paint Rock branch, about 45 miles, by July 1, 1881. But if they were delayed by any cause for which they were not responsible, then the commissioners were to allow a reasonable extension of time for the completion of the line.

Other provisions in the act protected the state from undesired eventualities, and they reflected Jarvis' determination to get the railroad built despite obstacles. The company could not discriminate against North Carolina towns and cities in the matter of transportation rates. In case of default, the act provided a specific course of action for the state to take over the railroad and continue construction. The main protection for the state in case of default was that the railroad could not be foreclosed for any reason until both branches were finished. All bonds issued had to state this requirement clearly. Also, the new company could sell the railroad,

but the new purchasers would be equally bound by all these provisions. Thus, the owners would sign a contract with the state whereupon the state would deposit the deed to be held in escrow until the contract terms were completed. Then the owners would take over the company by May 29, 1880, reorganize it, assume the \$850,000 state mortgage and pay the interest, pay the \$30,000 floating debt, issue stocks and bonds setting aside \$520,000 worth of bonds for the state, continue work steadily, forward payments for the convict labor, permit the state commissioners to inspect the construction, and finish both branches on the required dates. On January 1, 1885, the owners would receive the deed for the road and North Carolina would no longer have any relationship with it.<sup>31</sup>

After agreeing to buy the railroad, Best found he could not raise the necessary money from his partners, Grace, Fish, and Tappan. These men immediately assigned all their interests to another group of Virginia and northern financiers. They, in turn, planned to lease a number of railroads and organize them into a system operating between Richmond and Atlanta. They had first acquired the Richmond and Danville Railroad, and in 1871 they had leased the state-owned North Carolina Railroad.

On July 31, 1880, Best assigned his interest in the railroad to William P. Clyde and Alfred S. Buford, steamship owners and railroad promoters from New York City, and to Thomas M. Logan of Richmond, Virginia. Logan and his associates had bought controlling interest in the Richmond and Danville Railroad in 1878 and hoped to join the Western North Carolina Railroad to the Richmond and Danville system. This transaction delayed the beginning of construction for four months. At a meeting in April, 1881, the stockholders

<sup>31</sup>Margaret Whistle Morris, "The Western North Carolina Railroad and the Failure of the North Carolina System," (Unpublished master's thesis, Wake Forest University, 1968). Hereinafter cited as Morris, "Failure of North Carolina System."

of the Western North Carolina Railroad removed President Best and his board of directors and elected a new board of directors with Alexander Boyd Andrews as president.<sup>32</sup>

Being four months behind schedule, Andrews faced an extremely hard task in building the railroad branches in time. Construction on the Paint Rock branch had started in 1870 and 40 percent of the grading had been done before the Swepson scandal halted construction. However, the Paint Rock branch offered one convenience in its proximity to the French Broad River. After blasting, the debris could be dumped into the river and thus be disposed of at comparatively little expense and labor. There were also no deep cuts or heavy fills along the Paint Rock branch.

In late June, the rails reached five miles north of Asheville. To reach Paint Rock, about 46 miles from Asheville, Andrews would have to blast out the roadbed along the steep banks<sup>K</sup> of the French Broad River. The railroad would cross the river three times over two timber trestles and one iron bridge. Also, he would have to reach the Pigeon River on the Ducktown branch across 20 miles of rough mountain terrain.

On April 30, 1881, Andrews petitioned the state for a four-month extension beyond July 1, 1881, to complete construction to Pigeon River and Paint Rock. He pointed out that the original grantees lost four months from March 29, to July 31, 1880, which was the basis of estimate when the General Assembly prescribed the July 1, 1881 deadline; therefore, the owners should be given a four-month extension. Andrews also pointed out that the winter of 1880-1881 was unparalleled in its severity; and, besides, the state had failed to provide some of the 500 promised convicts. Commissioners Zebulon B. Vance, John M. Worth, and Thomas J. Jarvis met in Raleigh on

<sup>32</sup>Yearns, Papers of Jarvis, 390.



April 30, 1881, to consider Andrews' application.

At this time, however, a new element entered the picture. Best told Vance that he had organized a new syndicate and had money in hand to redeem his mortgaged interest in the Western North Carolina Railroad. During early May, Vance received what he considered reliable information that Andrews was using shoddy construction methods. He believed that under Best the railroad would be well constructed. In addition, he was convinced that the Clyde, Buford, and Logan interests intended to use the railroad to build up Richmond, Virginia, at the expense of the Piedmont North Carolina cities, whereas Best planned to build a North Carolina system.<sup>33</sup>

Commissioners Vance and Worth reported to Governor Jarvis on August 25, 1881, that work had not been pushed with diligence, extension of the line to the specified points had not been accomplished by July 1, 1881 and that the railroad agents were discriminating in freights and charges against North Carolina towns, cities, and railroads contrary to their contract. Andrews attempted to defend the interests of his group against the state.<sup>34</sup>

Andrews believed that he had obtained the time extension to November 1, 1881, and that he would be allowed a 90 day grace period after that. He considered that he would actually have until January 28, 1882, before the commissioners could notify the governor of his failure to reach Paint Rock and Pigeon River.

During the summer of 1881, Andrews worked hard to reach his blueprint goals. He steadily hired workers until, by August, the number of convicts and hired laborers on both lines totaled 1,400. He demanded correction

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 394.

<sup>34</sup> William Donaldson Cotton, "Appalachian North Carolina: A Political Study, 1860-1889," (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, the University of North Carolina, 1954), 357.

for the outbreak of scurvy among the convicts who were at work. By August, the railroad reached Marshall, not quite half the distance to Paint Rock. During that month the construction crews were still grading the Ducktown branch to the Pigeon River.<sup>35</sup>

Despite Andrews' labors, the commissioners rallied more solidly behind Best. On August 1, 1881, Vance, Jarvis, and Worth informed William P. Clyde, Alfred S. Buford, and Thomas M. Logan of their agreement with Best. The Commissioners then approached Clyde, Buford, and Logan with an offer of \$250,000 for services done. This offer was rejected, and Jarvis defended his action in an open letter to the Raleigh News and Observer. Jarvis stated that he did not intend to declare the contract of the railroad void or to stop work but wanted to substitute Best as owner of the railroad in place of the Richmond and Danville syndicate. Jarvis favored the Best syndicate because it proposed to build 150 miles more railroad than the Richmond and Danville and to operate the whole line as an east-west line.<sup>36</sup>

In the meantime, Andrews rushed to complete the railroad to Pigeon River and Paint Rock by January 30, 1882. The Asheville Citizen reported, "During the past week the last rail was laid on the Paint Rock branch." The article continued, "And on Friday Col. A. B. Andrews had the supreme gratification of driving the last spike in the Pigeon River section of the Ducktown branch."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, because of some unfinished details of construction trains could not travel regularly along the railroad. For two months, Andrews continued work on the branches to prepare the lines for an inspection by the commissioners.

<sup>35</sup> Morris, "Failure of North Carolina System," 67.

<sup>36</sup> Raleigh, (North Carolina), News and Observer, September 3, 1881.

<sup>37</sup> Asheville, (North Carolina), Citizen, January 30, 1882; Morris, "Failure of North Carolina System," 97.

On April 5, 1882, the commissioners officially inspected the branches to Paint Rock and Pigeon River. Although they noted that much of the construction was still in a temporary condition, they did not quibble over whether or not the lines had been finished on time. After the inspection, the commissioners and the railroad men together celebrated the completion of the lines.<sup>38</sup>

In 1883 the state wrote a new contract with the Richmond and Danville syndicate which made several concessions to the syndicate regarding the construction of the Ducktown branch. In return the Richmond and Danville syndicate agreed to buy for \$600,000 the \$520,000 of bonds that the first contract required be delivered to the state treasurer. By September, 1884, Andrews had completed the railroad as contracted, and on September 17, Governor Jarvis conveyed to the Richmond and Danville syndicate all the state's interest in the railroad. From 1884 on, the state continued a relationship with the railroad because state convicts were still used on the construction and because the state would receive the portion of the railroad southwest from the mouth of the Nantahala River in case of default.<sup>39</sup>

The Paint Rock branch was the first railroad ever built through the Appalachian Mountains south of the Roanoke River in Virginia. At Paint Rock the Western North Carolina Railroad connected with the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad; and with the completion of the Knoxville and Ohio Railroad, Asheville was only a 21-hour journey from Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>38</sup>Raleigh, (North Carolina), News and Observer, April 11, 1882.

<sup>39</sup>Yearns, Papers of Jarvis, XLVIII

## Chapter V

### The Completion of the Western North Carolina Railroad 1882-1891

With construction ended on the Paint Rock branch, Alexander B. Andrews could devote his entire attention to the construction of the Murphy branch. The building of the Murphy branch would be an arduous task, complicated in some instances by fumbling on the part of the engineers. Although a good deal of the work on the line between Asheville and Pigeon River (modern Canton) was done in 1869 and 1870 by Swepson and company, much remained. By October 17, 1878, one third of the grade between Asheville and Balsam had been completed. Much heavy work had been done on Scott's Creek. Once down into Scott's Creek Valley, the heavy construction of the line would be done. The work down Scott's Creek, down the Tuckaseige River, up the Nantahala River and down Valley River, excepting a few miles of rough work, was comparatively easy. At least 30 miles of it could be made by simply leveling up six to twelve inches with the spade and shovel.<sup>1</sup> With the completion of the Paint Rock branch on January 28, 1882, the entire labor force was placed on the Murphy branch.

In January, 1882, the railroad entered Haywood County and was proclaimed as one of the greatest industrial developments to come to that part of the state in the Nineteenth Century. Governor Jarvis' message to the 1883 General Assembly stated that the railroad had been completed to Pigeon River and was open for business. No track had been laid west of Pigeon River, but the grading had been completed to Balsam Gap, eighteen

<sup>1</sup>(Asheville); North Carolina Citizen, October 17, 1878.

miles west of the town of Pigeon River, and was nearly finished to Cowee Tunnel, 33 miles west of Pigeon River by March 1, 1883, and to a point near Charleston (modern Bryson City), in Swain County, 48 miles west of Pigeon River, by June 1 of that year.<sup>2</sup>

As the railroad approached Canton, Clyde, and Waynesville, the activities and preparations for its arrival increased. Cows, hogs, sheep, turkeys, fruits, hides and other products were brought from farms as far west as the Balsams, and from the settlements of Jonathan's Creek, Iron Duff, Crabtree, and Fine's Creek. The long awaited railroad reached Canton in January, 1882; Clyde in August, 1882; and Waynesville in April, 1883.<sup>3</sup>

Three camps were established in Haywood County with 125 convicts in each. Alfred B. Fortune was in charge of a camp at Saunook. Fortune hired free labor to complete two miles of the railroad. This labor was paid one dollar a day and constituted the only free labor to work on the construction of the line through Haywood County. John M. McMurry had a camp near the high trestle east of Canton. Arnold M. Jones had a camp one half mile east of Clyde and Andrew E. Wood had a camp at Lake Junaluska. Convicts did the excavation work, laid the rails, and made culverts and trestles.<sup>4</sup>

During 1881 and 1882, an average of 483 convicts worked on the railroad. During these two years 149 escaped, 74 died of natural causes, and 20 were killed in accidents or in attempts to escape - 243 convicts

<sup>2</sup>Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1883, doc. no. 1, p. 12. (Raleigh: Ashe and Gatling, State Printers and Binders, 1883).

<sup>3</sup>W. Clark Medford, The Middle History of Haywood County with Story Supplement (Waynesville, North Carolina: n.p., 1968), 16.

<sup>4</sup>W. Thomas Reeves, "A History of Haywood County," (Unpublished master's thesis, Duke University, 1937), 92.

lost in two years.<sup>5</sup>

At Balsam Gap, on the border of Haywood and Jackson counties, the railroad reached its highest point, 3,348 feet, and the station built there was proclaimed as the highest east of the Rocky Mountains. From here to Murphy the track would simply slide down the mountain except for one climb over Red Marble Gap, west of Nantahala Gorge.

On the western side of Balsam Gap work was pushed down Scott's Creek toward Dillsboro under the direction of Marcellus Fagg. From Balsam Gap the railroad dropped more than 700 feet in four miles. Hall's, the first station in Jackson County after leaving Balsam, was convenient to meet the needs of the upper Scott's Creek area. Dillsboro, about 49 miles from Asheville, was the next station on the line.<sup>6</sup>

Here, in 1882, the 858 foot Cowee Tunnel required 18 months to cut through solid rock. On December 30, 1883, 19 convicts drowned while being ferried across the Tuckaseige River near the eastern portal of the tunnel. First reports of the tragedy indicated disregard of human life by overseers and guards. Edward R. Stamps, superintendent of the convicts, made an immediate investigation of the accident. Stamps reported that the convicts who camped on the east bank of the river were ferried across each morning to the west bank at the end of the tunnel. The only means of transportation for them was a dilapidated scow or flatboat on which they were herded in groups of about 20 for each trip. These men were chained together. When only a short way out the rear of the boat began to dip water. The convicts, terrified, made a sudden rush for the front of the boat.

<sup>5</sup>Herbert Stacy McKay, "Convict Leasing in North Carolina, 1870-1934," (Unpublished master's thesis, the University of North Carolina, 1942), 39. Hereinafter cited as McKay, "Convict Leasing in North Carolina."

<sup>6</sup>Sylva, (North Carolina), The Tuckaseige Democrat, December 3, 1888.

The shifting of weight lifted the stern high out of the water and the boat capsized. Guard William J. Foster and his shackled convicts were spilled into the Tuckaseige. The convicts struggled desperately to get back on shore, but their heavy chains and the swift current pulled them under. Guard Foster and only one of the convicts were saved. Stamps reported no flagrant violations by overseers or guards and cited one of the convicts for saving guard Foster.

Stamps also reported on many aspects of convict labor. Stamps noted that the mode of punishment for minor offenses was by black marking, a method which affected the prisoner's commutation; for greater offenses, it was whipping. This was only done by or under the supervision of a duly elected officer of the penitentiary and was limited to ten strokes. The lashing was administered with a leather strap. No guard or overseer was allowed to inflict punishment. Often the convicts were reckless with their lives. Stamps frequently found men who had received injuries from falling rock, or from careless use of tools, that should have been avoided. Some convicts purposely destroyed their shoes and clothing.<sup>7</sup>

Governor Jarvis visited the convicts in December, 1882, traveling as far as Balsam Gap, 33 miles west of Asheville. There he inspected the quarters of about 150 convicts during the day and again at night. He reported that he found the men well fed, sheltered, and clothed, except a few imprudent ones who had partly cut up or burned their shoes.<sup>8</sup>

The coming of the railroad to Dillsboro in 1884 necessitated the removal of the post office from the Dills home to a location nearer the depot. The Post Office Department contracted with officials of the railroad

<sup>7</sup>Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1883, doc. no. 16, pp. 1-22. (Raleigh: Ashe and Gatling, State Printers and Binders, 1883).

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

to deliver the mail to this point. A box car on a side track was used as the first depot. Dillsboro's first summer guests came in 1886 entirely by rail, and since then it has been known as a tourist town. The Bryson house became the official dining place for passengers and employees of the railroad. The passenger train from Asheville stopped in Dillsboro for a quick meal. The number of passengers requesting reservations for dinner was telegraphed ahead from Balsam.<sup>9</sup>

The railroad followed the course of the Tuckaseige River, winding through its valley as it descended northwestward from Jackson County. Construction continued into Swain County. Prior to the building of the railroad, Swain County agricultural products rarely reached outside markets. Now the eastern markets became accessible.<sup>10</sup>

By 1885, the railroad was two years behind its scheduled completion to Murphy. The winter of 1885 seriously hindered construction as three feet of snow blanketed the countryside. In the spring, the work at Nantahala was obstructed by loose soil and rainy weather. The slopes were washed by swollen streams; the raging Nantahala River tore away embankments, tracks, and bridges. Plans to tunnel through the mountains at the confluence of the Snowbird and Nantahala Mountains had to be abandoned as tests showed that the soil could not support the roof and sides of a tunnel.<sup>11</sup>

The Biennial Report of the Officers of the Penitentiary for 1885 revealed that the work upon the Western North Carolina Railroad was a

<sup>9</sup>Minnie Dills Gray, A History of Dillsboro, North Carolina, (Asheville: The Stephens Press, 1959), 15.

<sup>10</sup>Asheville, (North Carolina), Citizen-Times, January 26, 1969.

<sup>11</sup>John Gilbert, (ed.), Crossties Through Carolina--The Story of North Carolina's Early Day Railroads, (Raleigh, North Carolina: The Helios Press, 1954), 47.



major source of disease and death among the convicts. The report stated that the rigors of the mountain winters met little resistance in the eastern Negroes, who readily succumbed to rheumatic, bronchial, and pulmonary diseases. At Dark Ridge camp, situated among the Balsam Mountains, some ten miles west of Waynesville, the winter of 1885 brought considerable exposure and suffering which added materially to the mortality rate.<sup>12</sup>

An act was passed on March 9, 1885, which stated that, of the 500 convicts assigned to work on the Western North Carolina Railroad, the force at work between the Nantahala Mountains and Murphy should be increased to at least 125, should not be lowered below that number, but might be increased to 150. The gang was to be kept continuously at work until the line was completed to Murphy.<sup>13</sup>

Surveying errors proved costly to the railroad as the section from Nantahala to Topton had to be rerouted three times before the track laying was completed. James Coleman, a Richmond and Danville engineer, called for a four percent grade to be maintained in the track ascending to Topton and the construction gangs were nearing this point when Richmond and Danville officials called in an expert, Thomas Hankins, to give his opinion. Hankins maintained that Coleman's gradient was too steep and rerouted the railroad over the mountain. However, work along Hankin's survey ceased when a pool of white mud was found beneath Red Marble Mountain. For the third time, the line had to be rerouted.<sup>14</sup> This delay at Red Marble Mountain cost the

<sup>12</sup>Biennial Report of the Officers of the North Carolina Penitentiary, 1885, doc. no. 3, p. 15. (Raleigh: P.M. Hale, State Printer and Binder, 1885).

<sup>13</sup>Laws of North Carolina, 1885, vol. no. XXXVIII, ch. 292, 540.

<sup>14</sup>Herbert G. Monroe, "No Harder to Build Than to Operate, This Mountain Road Has Repaid All Investments--Even of Lives--With Interest," Railroad Magazine, (June, 1949), 44-46.

railroad the right of way into Ducktown, Tennessee, center of a rich copper-mining district. When the railroad failed to provide service by January 1, 1885, the Marietta and North Georgia Railroad laid rails into Ducktown, and then moved steadily east northeastward to Murphy.

By October 1, 1888, the railroad was only completed to Jarrett's, 28 miles from Murphy. Delay came at Jarrett's from the building of the Hawknest Trestle. This facility, over 400 feet long when completed, with an average height of 43 feet, overcame one of the last major obstacles.

About the time Hawknest Trestle was finished, the cutting at the peak of Red Marble Mountain was leveled off for the track layers. Finally Red Marble Gap, 2700 feet above sea level, was reached on January 17, 1889, after the dugout 43 feet deep was completed. White mud hindered this construction, and over two years were spent at this point. Numerous crossties were pitched into the muck to provide a firm foundation.

By November, 1889, grading was being pushed into the Valley River Valley. Thus, all the difficult mountain work was passed. The grading force then went to work on the railroad one mile east of Valleytown. Grading proceeded at the rate of 2 1/2 miles per month. At the arrival of the railroad in Valleytown, a large barbeque was given with the Ellwood Coronet Band of Murphy and the Bryson City Brass Band providing music. Convict quarters were moved to Marble in December, 1889, leaving only nine miles of track to be completed to Murphy.<sup>15</sup>

During 1888 and 1889, the hurried construction began to have its results. Accidents occurred almost every month during these final two years due to rotten ties and short rails. Trestles were continually being washed out and a special crew of men, headed by a Captain Knight, were kept on the line for

<sup>15</sup>Sylva, (North Carolina), The Tuckaseige Democrat, November 27, 1889.

such emergencies.<sup>16</sup> The Richmond and Danville authorities announced that as soon as Murphy was reached, better rails would be built, improved bridges constructed, and additional trains put on. However, the soft condition of the roadbed and rocks on the track caused frequent and numerous accidents.

Penitentiary officers reported in 1888 a decrease in the mortality rate for the past two years, due in large measure to the careful attention of an able corps of physicians, and also to the improvement in the quarters, to the character and variety of the food furnished the convicts, and to the fact that the penitentiary officials now had the convicts almost entirely under officers of their own choosing.<sup>17</sup>

Dr. John W. McGee, the penitentiary physician, reported that special care had been taken to promote hygiene and improve the sanitary condition of the camps. A physician was employed at each camp as health officer, and he had supervision over all sanitary matters. It was his duty to see that the prisoners were not overworked, cruelly treated, or subjected to avoidable exposure. The food, including its quality, quantity, preparation, the manner in which it was served, and the frequency with which it was changed or varied, was under his direction. The health officer was required to make a daily report of the sickness and the sanitary condition of the camp, and forward it on the first day of each week to the penitentiary physician, as well as to make a monthly report. Dr. McGee stated that these daily reports had been prepared promptly, thus making his frequent personal visits unnecessary.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Bryson City, (North Carolina), Swain County Herald, February 14, 1889.

<sup>17</sup>Legislative Documents of North Carolina, 1889, ch. 9, p. 27. (Raleigh: Josephus Daniels, State Printer and Binder, 1889).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

As repairs were made, the volume of freight coming into Western North Carolina increased. Trains ran with greater regularity and more freight was hauled. Often the east-bound train was crowded, and an additional coach had to be taken from the west-bound train at Balsam to accommodate the passengers.

Efforts were made along the line to provide easier access to the track. Near Bryson City, at Briartown, four miles from the track, a saw mill was erected in June, 1889. Lumber was hauled in wagons to a point one mile from the railroad and then conveyed by a cable line to the track. Residents of Webster, three miles from Sylva, in January, 1890, clamored for a branch line from Sylva; but the Richmond and Danville authorities, remembering the futility of the Newton branch line, refused to accept the idea. The refusal of the Richmond and Danville authorities to build a branch line from Sylva to Webster was a major reason for the movement of the county seat from Webster to Sylva in 1913. In Sylva, a 600-foot side track at the kaolin works was built in May, 1889. The railroad authorities, however, opposed the removal of the Sylva depot to the plant of the Equitable Manufacturing Company, stating that they would not be a party to any transaction which would place the people of Sylva at a disadvantage and would not agree to the removal of the depot unless it was agreeable to the majority of the citizens.<sup>19</sup>

The rapid increase of freight on the Murphy division rendered it necessary that mail trains carry through freight only, with separate trains for local freight. This change also helped travelers whose patience was taxed by long delays occasioned by taking off and putting on freight.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Sylva, (North Carolina), The Tuckaseige Democrat, June 19, 1889.

<sup>20</sup>Asheville, (North Carolina), Democrat, October 10, 1889.

By February, 1890, the site of the new town of Andrews, named for Alexander Boyd Andrews, was established. Andrews was 16 miles east of Murphy and 100 miles from Asheville. Promoters of the railroad saw to it that the founding of the new town attracted considerable public attention. Developers advertised lots for sale and on the appointed day some 300 lots were sold, bringing in over \$18,000. Only half of the lots were offered for sale. New stores and residences sprang up, and a talc mine was developed.

By February 6, 1890, the last ten miles of solid earth had been removed. On June 5, 1890, the roadbed was completed to the bridge over Valley River, 14 miles northeast of Murphy; and railroad authorities expected the track to be completed to Hayes Farm, five miles east of Murphy.<sup>21</sup> Finally, on July 29, 1891, the railroad reached Murphy and the long-sought goal of constructing a railroad into Western North Carolina was accomplished.<sup>22</sup>

Accidents continued and complaints were heard about trains being irregular in sticking to their schedule.

Finally, the newly established Rail Road Commission investigated charges that the Western North Carolina Railroad was unsafe and that it discriminated against passengers from the region west of Waynesville. The Richmond and Danville authorities assured the Commission that the grievances would be immediately readressed. Three months later the Commission found the discrimination to have been corrected and that the roadbed had new rails.<sup>23</sup>

Under Richmond and Danville direction, the railroad was finally completed to Murphy. In 1892, both the Richmond and Danville and the Richmond and West

<sup>21</sup> Asheville, (North Carolina), Democrat, October 7, 1890.

<sup>22</sup> Sylva, (North Carolina), The Tuckaseige Democrat, July 29, 1891.

<sup>23</sup> Martha Francis Bowditch, "The North Carolina Rail Road Commission, 1891-1899," (Unpublished master's thesis, the University of North Carolina, 1944), 75.

Point Terminal Company, which together controlled several thousand miles of rails and was the largest system in the South, fell into receivership. John P. Morgan, a prominent New York banker and financier, reorganized the defunct railroads into the Southern Railway Company. Thus in 1894, the Western North Carolina Railroad, the North Carolina Railroad, and the Richmond and Danville became parts of the Southern Railway Company. Alexander B. Andrews was made first vice-president of the Southern Railway Company.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Fairfax Harrison, A History of the Legal Development of the Railroad System of the Southern Railway Company, (Washington, D. C.; n.p., 1901) pp. 250-253.

## CONCLUSION

The Western North Carolina Railroad was an excellent example of early railroad construction. Begun in the 1850's and finally completed in 1891, the railroad provided a long and interesting series of construction problems and engineering feats that remain as a monument to the dedicated men who built the line over the mountains of Western North Carolina.

In the building of this railroad, numerous other obstacles were overcome. The Civil War almost caused its abandonment, and the Reconstruction Republican Government almost exhausted its finances. Political turmoil developed over the extension of the railroad into Western North Carolina. Nevertheless, the greatest obstacle was the rugged terrain. Convict labor proved to be the answer to many engineering problems. After 25 years of state ownership, the railroad was taken over by the Richmond and Danville Railroad, which pushed it to Murphy.

The line of track finally penetrated the remote mountain region and brought an exchange of goods between the products of the outside world and the products of the mountain people. The track gave North Carolina a rail connection with the Mississippi Valley.

However, all the long years of labor in the field and in the halls of the North Carolina General Assembly should not go unnoticed. Today when one rides on the interstate highway system through Western North Carolina and notices the line of track near the road, he should remember the difficulty that the railroad cost the state and reflect that it was completed despite nearly insurmountable obstacles. Men with nineteenth century tools completed a task that would challenge the technology of the twentieth century.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### I. Primary Sources

#### A. Manuscript Collections

Alexander Boyd Andrews Collection, Southern Historical Collection  
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Augustus Summerfield Merrimon Collection, North Carolina State  
Department of Archives and History, Raleigh.

Charles F. Fisher Collection, North Carolina State Department  
of Archives and History, Raleigh.

George W. Swepson Collection, North Carolina State Department  
of Archives and History, Raleigh.

William Holland Thomas Collection, Archives and Special Collections  
Division, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, North  
Carolina.

Zebulon Baird Vance Collection, North Carolina State Department  
of Archives and History, Raleigh.

#### B. Collected Documents

Brooks, Aubrey Lee, and Hugh Talmage Lefler (eds.). The Papers  
of Walter Clark. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina  
Press, 1948.

Hamilton, J. G. de Roulhac (ed.). The Correspondence of Jonathan  
Worth. 2 vols. Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing  
Company, 1909.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Papers of Thomas Ruffin. 4 vols. Raleigh:  
Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1920.

Johnston, Frontis W. (ed.). The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance.  
Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1963.

Yearns, Wilfred Buck (ed.). The Papers of Thomas Jordan Jarvis.  
Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1969.

#### C. Railroad Reports

Annual Proceedings of the Western North Carolina Rail-Road Company,  
with Reports of Officers for 1872. Eugene B. Drake and Son,  
Power Press Printers, Statesville, North Carolina, 1872.

First Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the Western Division of  
the Western North Carolina Railroad Company, Assembled at  
Asheville, October 13, 1869. J. J. Bruner, Printer, Salisbury,  
North Carolina, 1869.



First Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners of North Carolina for the Year Ending December 31, 1892. Josephus Daniels, State Printer and Binder, Presses of Edwards and Broughton, 1892, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Fourth Annual Report of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company, 1858. Printed at the Watchman Office, 1859. Salisbury, North Carolina.

Proceedings of the General Meeting of Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company, 1855 to 1869. Printed at the Banner Office, 1869, Salisbury, North Carolina.

Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the Western Division of the Western North Carolina Rail-Road Company, Together with the Reports of the President, Chief Engineer, and Treasurer, at Asheville, North Carolina, November 1, 1870. J. J. Bruner, Printer, Salisbury, North Carolina, 1870.

Record of the Commissioners of the Western North Carolina Railroad, Raleigh, November 14, 1881. Ashe and Gatling, State Printers and Binders, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Second Annual Report of the President and Directors to the Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Railroad together with the proceedings of the Stockholders at their Annual Meeting Held in Statesville on the 28th August, 1856. Printed at the Watchman Office, 1857, Salisbury, North Carolina.

Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road Company--Marion, North Carolina, August 31, 1871. J. J. Bruner, Printer, Salisbury, North Carolina, 1871.

Third Annual Report of the Western North Carolina Railroad, August 27, 1857. Printed at the Watchman Office, 1858, Salisbury, North Carolina.

D. Government Documents

Legislative Documents of North Carolina. (1850-1895).

North Carolina House Journal. (1866-1877).

Public and Private Laws of North Carolina. (1866-1877).

The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. 4 series. 128 volumes. Published under the direction of the Secretary of War. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1880-1901.

## E. Newspapers

Asheville Citizen (Asheville, North Carolina), January 16, 1879.

\_\_\_\_\_, April 2, 1922.

\_\_\_\_\_, September 24, 1925.

\_\_\_\_\_, September 28, 1930.

\_\_\_\_\_, June 14, 1931.

\_\_\_\_\_, September 25, 1938.

\_\_\_\_\_, March 26, 1950.

\_\_\_\_\_, May 20, 1963.

Asheville Citizen Times (Asheville, North Carolina), October 9, 1938.

\_\_\_\_\_, April 10, 1939.

\_\_\_\_\_, September 19, 1948.

\_\_\_\_\_, February 20, 1949.

\_\_\_\_\_, March 7, 1954.

\_\_\_\_\_, July 17, 1960.

\_\_\_\_\_, January 26, 1969.

Asheville Daily Advance (Asheville, North Carolina), 1883-1888.

Asheville Democrat (Asheville, North Carolina), 1889-1890.

Asheville News (Asheville, North Carolina), July 29, 1858.

Asheville Register (Asheville, North Carolina), 1884.

Asheville Times (Asheville, North Carolina), August 7, 1929.

\_\_\_\_\_, June 21, 1939.

Carolina Watchman (Salisbury, North Carolina), 1862-1864.

Greensboro Daily News (Greensboro, North Carolina), August 22, 1926.

Murphy Advance (Murphy, North Carolina), 1885.

Murphy Bulletin (Murphy, North Carolina), 1886, 1888.

News and Observer (Raleigh, North Carolina), 1879-1882.

\_\_\_\_\_, May 18, 1940.

\_\_\_\_\_, April 12, 1942.

North Carolina Citizen (Asheville, North Carolina), May 1, 1873-  
May 15, 1879.

Observer (Raleigh, North Carolina), 1876-1880.

Register (Raleigh, North Carolina), 1862-1868.

"Scrapbook of Newspaper Clippings on North Carolina Railroads,  
1881-1882." North Carolina Collection, University of  
North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Swain County Herald (Bryson City, North Carolina), 1889-1890.

Tuckaseige Democrat (Sylva, North Carolina), 1888-1895.

Waynesville Courier (Waynesville, North Carolina), 1888-1890.

Western Democrat (Charlotte, North Carolina), January 18, 1872.

#### F. Penitentiary Reports

Biennial Report of the President of the State Penitentiary,  
1881-1882. Ashe and Gatling, State Printers and Binders,  
1881, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Biennial Report of the Officers of the North Carolina Penitentiary,  
1885. Ashe and Gatling, State Printers and Binders, 1885,  
Raleigh, North Carolina.

Biennial Report of the Directors of the North Carolina State  
Penitentiary, 1885-1886. Peter M. Hale, State Printers and  
Binders, 1885, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Biennial Report of the Officers of the North Carolina Penitentiary,  
1889. Josephus Daniels, State Printer and Binder, 1889,  
Raleigh, North Carolina.

## II. Secondary Sources.

### A. Monographs and Special Studies

Abdill, George B. Civil War Railroads. Seattle: Superior  
Publishing Company, 1961.

Ashe, Samuel A'Court. History of North Carolina. Vol. II,  
Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1925.

Arthur, John Preston. Western North Carolina--A History from  
1730-1913. Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company,  
1914.

Barrett, John Gilchrist. The Civil War in North Carolina. Chapel  
Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963.

- \_\_\_\_\_. North Carolina As A Civil War Battleground, 1861-1865. Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1960.
- Black, Robert C. The Railroads of the Confederacy. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952.
- Boyd, William K. History of North Carolina. Vol. II, The Federal Period, 1783-1860. New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1919.
- Brown, Cecil Kenneth. A State Movement In Railroad Development--The Story of North Carolina's First Effort to Establish an East and West Trunk Line Railroad. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1928.
- Carter, Thomas D. The Western North Carolina Railroad in Litigation. Washington, D. C.; n. p., 1882.
- Conner, Robert D. W. North Carolina--Rebuilding an Ancient Commonwealth, 1584-1925. 4 vols. New York: The American Historical Society, 1929.
- Daniels, Jonathan. Prince of Carpetbaggers. New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1958.
- Dowd, Clement. Life of Zebulon B. Vance. Charlotte: Observer Printing and Publishing House, 1897.
- Dykeman, Wilma. The French Broad. New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955.
- Freel, Margaret Walker. Our Heritage--The People of Cherokee County, North Carolina, 1540-1955. Asheville, North Carolina: The Miller Printing Company, 1956.
- Gilbert, John. Crossties Through Carolina--The Story of North Carolina's Early Day Railroad. Raleigh, North Carolina: The Helios Press, 1958.
- Gray, Minnie Dills. A History of Dillsboro, North Carolina. Asheville, North Carolina: The Stephens Press, 1959.
- Green, Fletcher M. (ed.). Some Aspects of the Convict Lease System in the Southern States. Vol. XXXI, The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949.
- Hamilton, J. G. de Roulhac. History of North Carolina. Vol. III, North Carolina Since 1860. New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1919.

- \_\_\_\_\_. Reconstruction in North Carolina. New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1914.
- Harrison, Fairfax. A History of the Legal Development of the Railroad System of the Southern Railway Company. Washington, D.C.: The Southern Railway Company, 1901.
- Helper, Hinton R. Western North Carolina Nature's Trundle-Bed of Recuperation. New York: The South Publishing Company, 1886.
- Henderson, Archibald. North Carolina The Old North State and the New. Vol. II. Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1941.
- Logan, Frenise A. The Negro in North Carolina, 1876-1934. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964.
- Medford, W. Clark. The Middle History of Haywood County with Story Supplement. Waynesville, North Carolina: n. p., 1968.
- Freslar, Charles J., Jr. (ed.). A History of Catawba County. Salisbury, North Carolina: Rowan Publishing Company, 1954.
- Price, Charles L. The Railroad Schemes of George W. Swepson. Vol. I. Essays in American History Greenville, North Carolina: East Carolina College Press, 1964.
- Prince, Richard E. Steam Locomotives and Boats--Southern Railway System. Salt Lake City, Utah: Wheelwright Lithographing Company, 1965.
- Sondley, Foster A. Asheville and Buncombe County. Asheville, North Carolina: The Citizen Company, 1922.
- \_\_\_\_\_. A History of Buncombe County North Carolina. Asheville, North Carolina: The Advocate Printing Company, 1930.
- Smith, A. D. (ed.). Western North Carolina: Historical and Biographical. Charlotte, North Carolina: A. D. Smith and Company, 1890.
- Steiner, Jesse F., and Roy M. Brown. The North Carolina Chain Gang. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1927.
- Stover, John F. The Railroads of the South, 1865-1900--A Study in Finance and Control. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1927.
- Turner, George Edgar. Victory Rode the Rails--The Strategic Place of the Railroads in the Civil War. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953.

## B. Periodicals

Cable, George Washington. "The Convict Lease System in the Southern States," The Century Magazine, (February, 1881), 585-590.

Cameron, John Donald. "Alexander Boyd Andrews," North Carolina University Magazine, XXVI (May, 1894), 390-404.

Monroe, Herbert G. "No Harder to Build Than to Operate, This Mountain Road Has Repaid All Investments--Even of Lives--with Interest," Railroad Magazine (June, 1949), 32-59.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Rails Across the Blue Ridge," Railroad Magazine, (December, 1943), 17-21.

Morgan, Olin K. "North Carolina Struggled 30 Years to Build a Railroad From Salisbury, North Carolina to a Tennessee Connection," Piedmont and Northern and Durham and Southern Magazine, (December, 1948), 15-19.

Ratchford, B. U. "The North Carolina Public Debt," North Carolina Historical Review, X, (January, 1933), 1-20.

## c. Pamphlets

Davidson, Joseph P. Asheville City Directory and Gazeteer of Buncombe County for 1883-1884. Richmond, Virginia: Baughman Brothers, 1883.

Illustrated Guide Book of the Western North Carolina Railroad now Completed from Salisbury to Paint Rock. Issued Passenger Depot, Salisbury, 1882.

## D. Unpublished Works

Bowditch, Martha Francis. "The North Carolina Railroad Commission, 1891-1899." Unpublished master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1943.

Cotton, William Donaldson. "Appalachian North Carolina: A Political Study 1860-1889." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1954.

Holcombe, David M. "The Western North Carolina Railroad and the State Democrats, An Era of Changing Philosophy." Unpublished master's thesis, Wake Forest University, 1966.

McKay, Herbert Stacy. "Convict Leasing in North Carolina, 1870-1934." Unpublished master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1942.

- Morris, Margaret Whistle. "The Western North Carolina Railroad and the Failure of the North Carolina System." Unpublished master's thesis, Wake Forest University, 1969.
- Norburn, Martha Elizabeth. "The Influence of the Physiographic Features of Western North Carolina on the Settlement and Development of the Region." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1932.
- Price, Charles Lewis. "The Railroads of North Carolina during the Civil War." Unpublished master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1951.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Railroads and Reconstruction in North Carolina, 1865-1871." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1959.
- Reeves, W. Thomas. "A History of Haywood County." Unpublished master's thesis, Duke University, 1937.
- Russell, Mattie. "William Holland Thomas, White Chief of the North Carolina Cherokees." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duke University, 1959.
- Yoder, Julian Clifton. "The Mountain Counties of North Carolina: A Geographic Study." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1949.