The Richmond & Petersburg Railroad: A Story of Antebellum Southern Success

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THE RICHMOND & PETERSBURG RAILROAD  
A STORY OF ANTEBELLUM SOUTHERN SUCCESS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in History from the College of William & Mary in Virginia,  

by

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Director

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The Richmond & Petersburg Railroad

A story of Antebellum Southern Success
1836 - 1861

John J. Kelly
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Introduction

“The Great Southern Route and its Fast Train”

“The train was advertised to leave at 3:30pm. At that hour the cars were crowded with passengers, and the engineer, punctually at the minute, gave notice that he was at his post, by a long loud whistle of the locomotive.” Five minutes later, the train lurched forward from the Richmond, Virginia station. On board, Frederick Law Olmsted observed that “ten minutes afterwards we advanced three rods,” but the engine struggled, and “twelve minutes afterwards, returned to the first position.” The train continued this “‘backing and filling,’ upon the bridge over the rapids of the James river, for half an hour,” when it finally “crossed the bridge and fairly started for Petersburg.” Running at an average speed of thirteen miles per
hour, the train, Olmsted noted pointedly, had been “especially recommended by advertisement as ‘fast.’”

Along the way, a truck, or the metal undercarriage housing the wheels of one of the cars, began to smoke. “At one of the stoppages,” observed Olmsted, “the conductor, on having his attention called to it, nodded his head sagely” and, putting his hands in his pockets, “looked at the truck as if he would mesmerize it.” After a few moments, he stepped back, spat upon the truck and shouted “All right! Go ahead!” Not surprisingly, “at the next stoppage, the smoking was furious.” The conductor then crowded salt, water and what little oil he could find into the truck. “After five minutes longer delay, we went on, the truck still smoking and the water and oil boiling in the box, until we reached Petersburg. The heat was a result, I suppose, of a neglect of sufficient or timely oiling.” From the station platform, Olmsted “saw a negro oiling all the trucks of the train,” and “as he proceeded from one to other, he did not give himself the trouble to elevate the outlet of his oiler, so that a stream of oil, costing probably a dollar and a half a gallon, was poured out upon the ground the whole length of the train.”

Frederick Law Olmsted, who was from New York, traveled through the American South in 1853, and published a book detailing the experience in 1856. He sarcastically titled the chapter describing his rail journey from Richmond to Petersburg “The Great Southern Route and its Fast Train.” To Olmsted, this railroad was slow, technologically lacking, poorly operated and uneconomical – in short, a failure.

1 Olmsted, Frederick Law, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), pp52-54.
However, on the eve of the Civil War, this line – the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad (R&P) – was the most profitable in Virginia. Of the state’s fourteen antebellum railroads, only four paid dividends, or portions of a company’s profit paid regularly to its stockholders. From 1856 to 1860, the R&P issued more dividends than any other line.2 “Part of the wonder was that railroads could thrive in a world of plantations and thinly scattered farms,” writes historian Scott Reynolds Nelson.3 Slave plantations needed to ship large quantities of agricultural produce to market, but were largely self-sufficient and consumed few manufactured goods. Therefore, locomotives leaving with trains loaded with produce would return with a string of empty cars. “With limited inbound traffic to carry, many Southern railroads would continually struggle to pay back investors.”4 Historian John Majewski states that the South’s agricultural economy created a low population density, and “Virginia railroads had to zigzag along the countryside in a forlorn search for passengers and traffic.”5

The Richmond & Petersburg was different; it connected Virginia’s two largest antebellum cities, both regional trade hubs that provided the railroad with ample traffic. As Olmsted’s chapter title suggests, the R&P was more than just a local line; it was built specifically “to form a link in a continuous line of improvements from the North to the South,” and competed vigorously for long-distance passengers.6

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4 Ibid.
5 Majewski, 128.
6 March 1, 1836 *Richmond Enquirer*.
railroad also operated two branch lines that funneled freight to a wharf, where it was transferred to ships bound for the Atlantic. Although it carried considerable cargo, the R&P struggled financially into the 1850s, and was repeatedly assisted by the state of Virginia.

Very little has been written about this twenty-two-mile-long railroad. In 1920, Howard D. Dozier chronicled the line’s development in his book titled *A History of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad*. George Cole Scott, in 1985, wrote a paper arguing that the success of the R&P stemmed from its strong management. However, he not only confuses facts of the line's history but also fails to provide any concrete examples of managerial talent. In addition, Scott claims that “other railroads failed while the R&P prospered,” but does not name these lines nor explain why the R&P thrived during the antebellum period. He is mostly concerned with his great grandfather, Frederic R. Scott, who was president of the railroad beginning in the 1870s.

John Majewski, in *A House Dividing*, compares Pennsylvania and Virginia to analyze regional economic divergence in the period before the Civil War. Although he does not mention the R&P, he discusses railroads in minute detail. Majewski argues that Virginian slave society failed to produce a large city, like Philadelphia, that could both fund and direct east-to-west transportation projects. The result was a highly localized, haphazard and fragmented rail system that he labels a failure.

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In telling the story of the R&P, this paper seeks to understand how a railroad could be successful in the South, and what that success meant. I argue that the R&P formed part of an extended system of transportation that was designed to benefit Richmond, and that, because it accomplished this goal, it was a successful railroad.

Chapter one examines transportation to Richmond and Petersburg before the coming of the railroad. In the early nineteenth century, the Board of Public Works funded turnpikes and canals that facilitated trade. Richmond and Petersburg, because of their location on the fall line, became regional centers of commerce that exploited separate hinterlands.

Chapter two describes the early railroad movement in Virginia. The Petersburg Railroad extended southward from Petersburg, and the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad stretched northward from Richmond. These lines did not alter trading patterns, as each simply extended both cities’ distinct hinterlands. The line surveyed from Richmond to Petersburg was expected to increase commerce between the two cities but chiefly to benefit Richmond.

Chapter three examines the incorporation, construction and early years of the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad. The line struggled financially and was aided repeatedly by the state. In its early years, the railroad made most of its money by hauling passengers between the two cities.

Chapter four analyzes the R&P as part of a larger transportation network. The line fought energetically for long-distance passengers and worked in tandem with a steamboat line. The competition evoked rivalry between Richmond and Petersburg over who controlled the railroad, and therefore which city would benefit more from
it. The R&P was part of an extended system of commerce, but benefited local interests.

Chapter five details the line’s financial troubles in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Despite sufficient traffic, including the transportation of bituminous coal, the railroad was heavily in debt. Evidence suggests that the line was poorly managed. Once again, the state came to the rescue, and the railroad issued its first private dividends in 1855. The line had become financially successful.

Chapter six analyzes the nature of R&P success, revealing that by the mid-1850s the line had accomplished more than simply paying positive returns to investors. Designed to enhance Richmond, the railroad had made Petersburg its hinterland. While the R&P was antebellum Virginia’s most profitable line, it was not the only railroad that was successful. Other lines showed financial promise and brought real benefits to other locales.

In conclusion, the view of Virginia’s antebellum rail system as a total failure is unfairly looking backwards from its performance during the Civil War. As Olmsted’s description suggests, these railroads were lacking in comparison with those of the North. Nonetheless, Virginia’s antebellum railroads were successful in that they accomplished what they were designed to do.
Chapter 1
“THE SOLE PASSAGeways to DISTANT MARKETS”: RICHMOND AND PETERSBURG BEFORE THE RAILROAD

Soon after the first colonists landed at Jamestown in 1607, natural waterways became the primary transportation routes through Virginia. As the population expanded westward through the tidewater region in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the most sought-after land lay along the major rivers. Ocean-bound vessels could ascend these waterways, dock at individual plantations, load produce and carry it to markets abroad. With such easy access to transportation, these riverfront plantations became the largest and most profitable in Virginia at that time.

As more and more westward acres were brought into cultivation, the population crossed the fall line, the geologic barrier that separates the flat tidewater from the rolling piedmont region. At the fall line, which extends along the eastern seaboard from New Jersey to Alabama, rapids obstruct navigation on the major rivers. Planters above the falls, therefore, lacked the immediate access to ocean-going vessels enjoyed by those below. The water on the upper portions of the rivers was low for most of the year, restricting passage to shallow boats. In addition, shallow water meant that planters hoping to transport their produce “had to wait for spring thaws and fall freshets before they could load their raft with wheat, barley and flax, or barrels of flour, pork and whiskey.”

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10 Dozier, 12.
11 Dozier, 4.
12 Gibson, Langhorne, Cabell’s Canal (Richmond, VA: The Commodore Press, 2000), 12.
When waters were passable, dugout canoes were joined in pairs to form a stable platform on which a hogshead, or wooden cask, of tobacco could be transported.\textsuperscript{13} A single tobacco hogshead weighed between 1,100 pounds and a ton.\textsuperscript{14} In the late eighteenth century, bateaus began to ply the waters of Virginia. These wooden-planked, flat-bottomed crafts were fifty to sixty feet long and six to seven feet wide.\textsuperscript{15} A three-man crew piloted the boats downstream and poled them back upriver. Historian Melvin Patrick Ely, in his book \textit{Israel on the Appomattox}, describes an upstream journey on the Appomattox River:

The captain, or “headman,” stood at the stern of the boat and guided the craft with a steering oar some sixteen feet long mounted on a forked iron swivel. A plank walkway just inside the gunwale ran nearly the full length of the bateau. Along each of these walks, a boatman paced up and down throughout the upstream voyage. From the bow of the boat, he would plunge his pole, angled toward the stern, into the river bottom. Bracing his end of the pole against a pad on his shoulder, the boatman would walk toward the rear of the boat. Of course it was the boat, and not the man, that actually moved as a result.\textsuperscript{16}

Carrying as much as seven tons, bateaus could float in less than two feet of water, making them highly suitable for trade above the falls of Virginia’s rivers.\textsuperscript{17} On the James, if conditions were favorable, a fully loaded bateau could travel the 150 miles downstream from Lynchburg to Richmond in seven days.\textsuperscript{18}

When the first shots of the American Revolution were fired, Richmond was a town of about 600 people at the falls of the James River. In 1780, while the war

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. 13.} \\
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} Ely, Melvin Patrick, \textit{Israel on the Appomattox} (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 152} \\
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{15} Gibson, 13.} \\
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} Ely, 151-152.} \\
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 152.} \\
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18} Gibson, 13.}
raged, the Virginia state capital was moved there from Williamsburg. In 1785, two years after the Revolution had ended, an act of the Virginia legislature incorporated the James River Canal Company to improve navigation of the river. Promoters of the project hoped it would create a corridor for western trade. As early as 1716, the colonial Governor Spotswood had advocated a water route through Virginia to the Ohio River, a notion supported by George Washington after exploring 680 miles of Appalachia in 1784. In 1790, the Company completed a seven-mile canal around the falls at Richmond, facilitating the existing bateau traffic on the river. Reorganized as the James River and Kanawha Canal Company in 1835, the waterway was extended to Lynchburg by 1840. About 500 bateaus, employing 1500 people, carried between 15,000 to 18,000 hogsheads of tobacco and close to 30,000 pounds of flour down the canal from Lynchburg to Richmond annually.

From 1795 to 1807, the Upper Appomattox Company improved the Appomattox River. In the shallow sections, the company constructed wing-dams of stones to concentrate the flowing waters into channels deep enough to allow the passage of bateaus. Completed in 1807, the Upper Appomattox Canal ran to the town of Petersburg, located on the falls of the river, from a point five miles upstream. Like the James River Canal, this waterway allowed bateaux to avoid the treacherous and impassible rapids. Petersburg was also involved in a considerable overland trade that extended southward into North Carolina. “Travelers met

19 Gibson, 26.
21 Dozier, 19.
22 Ely, 15.
continually on the road hundreds of single hogsheads of tobacco drawn by two horses tandem.”23 For this method of transport, the barrel-like hogshead was laid on its side and an axle was run through its center, allowing it to roll.24 Wagons pulled by oxen or horses hauled freight, and stagecoach companies transported passengers by the end of the eighteenth century. 25 Since the surrounding land was sparsely settled, taverns were rare, and travelers were forced to lodge at farmhouses along the way or simply sleep on the side of the road.26 The routes over which these wagons, coaches and hogsheads rolled, like most early roads in Virginia, were little more than dirt paths, and the damp, sandy soil made them impassible for portions of the year.27 In 1808, the state of New York had 900 miles of graveled roads. Virginia’s total, however, was only 25.28

On February 5, 1816, in response to a growing demand for better intrastate transportation, the Virginia General Assembly passed an act that established a “Fund for Internal Improvement.” This fund was “to be applied, exclusively, to the purpose of rendering navigable, and uniting by canals, the principal rivers, and of more intimately connecting, by public highways, the different parts of this Commonwealth.” The act also created the Board of Public Works "for the purpose of preserving and improving this fund, and of disbursing such portions of it to be

23 Dozier, 20.
24 Ely, 144.
25 Turner, 352.
26 Ibid. 351-352.
27 Ibid. 350.
28 Gibson, 10.
applied to any object of internal improvement.” The Board was authorized to purchase two-fifths of the stock in internal improvement companies, provided that three-fifths of that stock had already been subscribed for privately. State investment in transportation projects was not a new idea. On December 20, 1790, for example, the General Assembly passed a bill that directed the state to subscribe for one hundred shares in the James River Canal Company. When the Fund for Internal Improvement was created, the Board of Public Works inherited all of the stock then held by the state in transportation companies, including that of the James River Canal.

In addition to canal projects, the Board of Public Works also invested in turnpikes. The Manchester and Petersburg Turnpike connected the town of Manchester, directly across the James River from Richmond, with Petersburg, twenty miles to the south. Chartered on July 13, 1816, the road’s construction was delayed; in 1824, the company reported to the Board of Public Works that only seven miles had been completed. The route required nineteen culverts and five substantial bridges, and its twenty-foot-wide gravel bedding was shaped in the form of an arch to help in “speedily throwing off water” during rainstorms. “Nowhere,” reported the company, “has it shewn a disposition to give way under the pressure of loaded carriages.” Finished on May 12, 1827, the turnpike had cost a total of

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31 Gibson, 30.
32 Dozier, 23.
33 1824 report to the BPW, Virginia State Library.
$92,375, of which the Board of Public Works had invested $8,000. From the road’s commencement to 1834, the turnpike company collected $33,916.89 in tolls on the traffic between the Petersburg and Richmond areas.

From a population of 6,000 in 1800, Richmond had swelled to 16,000 by 1830. Such growth can be largely attributed to the city’s location on the falls of the James River. Cargo-laden bateaux navigated the James River Canal to its terminus at Richmond. In 1831, 15,000 hogsheads of tobacco, 152,000 barrels of flour, 133,000 bushels of wheat, 677,664 bushels of coal, 1374 tons of iron and 2,230,900 pounds of manufactured tobacco floated down the canal into the city. Since ocean vessels could not ascend the river beyond the falls, cargo was transferred from the bateaux to these larger ships at Richmond. Eighty-one ships, with a tonnage of 23,000 tons, set sail for foreign ports in 1831 from the city. Cargo shipped to Richmond from abroad was transferred to bateaux and poled up river or carried south over the turnpike to Petersburg. In 1831, fifteen vessels carrying 3412 tons landed at Richmond, and the backcountry received 31,000 sacks of salt, 297 tons of bar and pig iron, and upwards of 3000 tons of plaster and lime.

Petersburg, on the falls of the Appomattox, developed similarly, albeit on a smaller scale. Tobacco and other freight that was floated down the Appomattox, carried northwards on the roads from North Carolina, or moved southward over the turnpike was loaded onto ocean vessels at Petersburg. Cargo coming up the river

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34 Dec. 5th, 1827 report to the BPW, (Virginia State Library).
35 1835 report to the BPW, (Virginia State Library).
36 Dozier, 17.
37 Ibid. 17-18.
38 Ibid. 18.
from abroad was unloaded in town and distributed to the surrounding area. By the early 1830s, Petersburg, like Richmond, had become a regional center of commerce. “Fall line towns dominated southern commercial activity,” writes railroad historian Maury Klein; “they were the sole passageways to distant markets and for that reason were destined to play an important role with the coming of the railroad.”39

The steam-powered railroad was first developed in England in the early nineteenth century. “To place a steam engine on wheels and to make it move both itself and additional weight was a bold conception,” declared an October 1829 article in the *Liverpool Times*. “These engines,” added the author, “skim over the earth at more than double the speed of the lightest and fastest mail, drawn by the swiftest blood horses, and driven by the most desperate coachman, over the smoothest roads in England.” This report, like many others, appeared across the Atlantic in the pages of Virginia’s newspapers. Reprinted in the *Richmond Enquirer*, the article trumpeted “the late experiments of Locomotive Carriages,” which “give us quite a new idea of what science and art may yet do to quicken the transport of travelers and goods through the land.”

Another English article published in the *Enquirer* concluded that “it is scarcely possible to over-estimate the importance of these experiments,” since through them “the power of the engines to keep up a rapid motion for a long distance has been fully established.”

When these fire-breathing machines began to operate in the United States, Virginia newspapers ran stories about American railroads. “We enjoyed the pleasure of a ride on our Rail Road in cars drawn by the Locomotive Steam Carriage” reported an article from the Charleston, South Carolina, *Courier* that was reprinted in the January 21, 1831, issue of the *Richmond Enquirer*. “This little engine, of six

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40 *Richmond Enquirer*, January 20, 1830.
41 *Richmond Enquirer*, August 30, 1830.
horse power,” pulled a train carrying 140 passengers at twenty miles per hour over the Charleston & Hamburg Railroad in South Carolina. Less than a month earlier, the same locomotive, known as the Best Friend of Charleston, had hauled the first steam-powered passenger train in the United States.42 “For the information of such our readers who as have not seen a Steam Carriage,” continued the article, the Best Friend "has a power calculated to be equal to only six horses, but is capable of continuing the same power for hours together, which six horses would be able to exert for only a few minutes.” Further championing the steam railroad, the author added that “the highest estimate of the expense of working an engine, embracing the cost of fuel, manual attention, and interest on cost of engines and cars, amounts to only about six dollars per day.”43

Such stories sparked some to clamor for railroads in Virginia. One of the leading advocates for railroad construction was Moncure Robinson. A native Virginian, Robinson had attended the College of William & Mary from 1816 to 1818, when he was expelled, along with 21 other students, over a disputed cost for a lecture class. Working for the Board of Public Works as a young man, he surveyed an extension of the James River Canal. From 1825 to 1828, Robinson trained as a civil engineer in Europe, where he became acquainted with England’s commercially successful early steam railroads.44 In 1830, he penned a lengthy letter to the editor

43 *Richmond Enquirer*, January 21, 1831.
of the *Richmond Enquirer*, in which he explained the value of the railroad as a means of conveyance. “Rail-Roads seem to present advantages over Canals,” wrote Robinson, “where quick transportation is important” and “where considerable differences of level are to be encountered.”

Moncure Robinson’s letter suggests that in 1830, many prominent Virginians still believed that canals, not railroads, were the future of transportation through

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45 *Richmond Enquirer*, December 8, 1830.
the state. “The primary conviction of these men was that the $1 million plus spent to
date on the James River canals and improvements must not be thrown away in favor
of a technology yet unproved.”46 In the years following, the Board of Public Works
continued to pour money into its centerpiece internal improvement. “Over the first
half of the nineteenth century, the James River Project accounted for most of the
$13.5 million the state spent to improve its canals and rivers during the antebellum
period.”47 Such investment stunted the growth of railroads in Virginia, as the state
was loath to fund rail lines that might take business from this waterway. It is
therefore no surprise that Virginia’s early railroads, which had to be chartered by
the state, were built where they would not compete with the James River Canal.

However, Virginia’s first steam-powered railroad was constructed specifically
to compete with another waterway, the Dismal Swamp Canal. Enterprising citizens
of Petersburg wished to build a railroad to tap the trade of Roanoke County, North
Carolina, 59 miles to the south. Heretofore, traffic from this area had floated
northward over the Dismal Swamp Canal to the coastline town of Norfolk, Virginia.
The railroad, if constructed, would divert much of this commerce to Petersburg at
the expense of Norfolk.48 On February 10, 1830, the General Assembly chartered the
Petersburg Railroad, and on March 22, 1831, authorized the Board to subscribe for
two-fifths, or $160,000, of the new rail line’s stock.49 However, the Board of Public
Works had already invested $64,000 in the Dismal Swamp Canal. “To encourage the

46 Gibson, 103.
47 Majewski, 124.
48 Dozier, 22.
49 Ibid. 24-25.
decrease its traffic and consequently its earning power, to the detriment of the state.”  

By funding the Petersburg Railroad, the Board of Public Works, and therefore the General Assembly, asserted that it favored the fall line town of Petersburg over the coastal city of Norfolk for commercial development. Put simply, Virginia wanted its fall line towns to grow. Finished in 1833, the railroad had a fleet of seven locomotives and 100 cars of various types by 1835. Each morning, a five- or six-car train would depart Petersburg loaded with passengers and freight for Weldon, North Carolina, and return to Petersburg in the late afternoon. By funneling such distant trade to Petersburg, the Petersburg Railroad greatly expanded city’s hinterland.

In 1834, soon after the Petersburg Railroad began hauling regular traffic, the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad (RF&P) was granted a charter by the General Assembly. Like the Petersburg, the Board of Public Works subscribed for two-fifths of the new railroad’s stock. Surveyed by Moncure Robinson, the line ran north from Richmond to Fredericksburg, Virginia, and thence to the Potomac River, greatly expanding the region for which Richmond served as commercial center.

While Petersburg was connected by rail to the south and trains would soon enter Richmond from the north, no track had been laid between the two fall-line towns. Travel from one to the other was still “a good day’s journey” by wagon over the Manchester & Petersburg Turnpike or by boat over the James and Appomattox

50 Ibid. 24.
51 Ibid. 25-26.
52 Turner, 356.
Rivers. As early as 1834, however, Virginia Governor John Floyd had advocated the consolidation of the RF&P with the Petersburg Railroad. The September 22, 1835, issue of the Richmond Enquirer reported that “the examination of the Route between Richmond and Petersburg will be commenced in a few days.” The author observed that, once the line was constructed, “there will be a continuous Railway from Fredericksburg to the Roanoke” Valley of North Carolina.

Moncure Robinson plotted a route just under twenty-two miles and published his report in December of 1835. He estimated that the line, although shorter, would cost more than both the RF&P and Petersburg railroads, as the terrain between Richmond and Petersburg “would present more difficulties in way of roadway formation.” Despite the high cost, Robinson argued that railroad would be profitable:

Forming, as it will, the closing link in the great rail line of rail road communication through the State, it will of course command the northern and southern travel, whilst it will, in addition, accommodate a local travel already considerable, and which will be necessarily very greatly increased by the execution of the work in question.

In addition to travel, he foresaw a “handsome trade” in coal, cotton and produce that would yield both prosperity and growth. “Bringing the towns of Richmond and Petersburg within one hour’s travel of each other,” concluded Robinson, “will give to the merchants of either town, facilities for the transaction of an extensive business, greatly beyond those now enjoyed by them.” Such commerce would allow “the state at large” to enjoy “the benefits of a commercial metropolis of twenty-five or six

53 Richmond Enquirer, April 24, 1838.
54 Turner, 360
55 Richmond Enquirer, September 22, 1835
It is important to emphasize that Robinson predicted that Richmond, not Petersburg, would grow; the line was designed chiefly to benefit Virginia's capital city. In light of such favorable predictions, "the bill to make a railroad from Richmond to Petersburg should be brought forward immediately," wrote William Pope to Moncure Robinson's brother Conway, "it will be passed instantly I have no doubt."
Chapter 3
“ON THE WINGS OF THE WIND TO RICHMOND”:
THE RICHMOND & PETERSBURG RAILROAD COMPANY

On March 14, 1836, the Virginia Legislature passed an act creating a joint-stock company “for the purpose of making a rail road between the city of Richmond and town of Petersburg.” The charter capitalized the company at $300,000, to which “any amount which the Board of Public Works may be authorized to subscribe on behalf of the state” could be added. Once $150,000 had been subscribed by private individuals, the shareholders would “be incorporated into a company, by the name and style of the Richmond and Petersburg Rail Road Company.”

The May 3, 1836, Richmond Enquirer reported, in an article titled “The Spirit Moving,” that “the books opened in this City on Thursday, and were closed on Saturday evening – only 3000 shares were allotted to Richmond,” but “4233 shares were taken.” That stock in the proposed railroad linking the two cities sold so rapidly indicates that many believed the project would succeed. Interestingly, the news made it as far north as New Hampshire; The Portsmouth Journal of Literature & Politics described the sale of stock in an article titled “Virginia Enterprise.” That the story appeared far away in New England reveals that the proposed rail line would have more than just local significance.

On May 5, 1836, the Richmond & Petersburg (R&P) was officially organized at the first meeting of its stockholders. John Majewski writes that the majority of

59 May 3, 1836, Richmond Enquirer.
60 May 21, 1836, Portsmouth Journal of Literature & Politics.
private shareholders in Virginia’s antebellum railroads lived near the lines that they were funding.\textsuperscript{61} Rather than quick profits, “the motivations of shareholders centered on indirect benefits, such as raising land values and improving access to markets for their localities.”\textsuperscript{62} In an 1837 list of the Richmond & Petersburg’s private stockholders, 108 of the total 126 were recorded with their location of residence. Of these 108, 75\%, lived in Richmond or Petersburg.\textsuperscript{63} Moncure Robinson, who lived in Philadelphia but traveled to Richmond, owned 246 shares, which was the most held by an individual. Robinson would remain a major influence in R&P affairs through the 1850s.

Before any railroad construction could begin, the R&P needed to acquire land on which to build its line. The General Assembly granted the company “full power and authority to enter upon all lands and tenements through which they may desire to conduct their rail road.” In addition, the R&P “shall be at liberty” to “to enter upon any adjacent lands, and to cut, quarry, dig, take and carry away therefrom, any wood, stone, gravel or earth, which they may deem necessary.” However, the company could “not, without the consent of the owner, cut down any fruit tree, or any tree preserved in any field or lot for shade or for ornament, or take any timber, gravel, stone or earth, constituting any part of any fence or building.” According to historian John Majewski, “the most controversial issue involving transportation companies was the right of eminent domain. No matter how eagerly landowners supported better transportation, they continually fretted over the ability of a

\textsuperscript{61} Majewski, 189.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. 8.
\textsuperscript{63} 1837 list of R&P stockholders, (Virginia State Library).
company legally to take or damage their land.” When landowners disagreed with the R&P “on the terms of purchase,” the county court was to appoint “five discreet, intelligent, disinterested, and impartial freeholders, to assess the damages to the owner from the condemnation of his land.” If the company committed “any wanton or wilful injury to such land,” it would be forced to “pay to the person so injured, double the amount of damages which shall be assessed by a jury.”

In 1838, the R&P reported that “the land damages have been, with a few exceptions, assessed throughout the line,” and some “have so far exceeded every reasonable estimate.” By 1839, the company had awarded $11,330.05 to landowners, stating that “the land damages along the line have, in general, been amicably settled, except in a few cases, where they were deemed particularly unreasonable.” The final two cases were not resolved until 1857, when the R&P was forced to pay $4,459.22 in compensation.

On June 21, 1836, the Richmond Enquirer reported that “so great a number of public works are now going on, that great difficulty is generally experienced in getting the requisite amount of labor.” However, as the RF&P neared completion north of Richmond, work gangs no longer needed on that line were transferred to the R&P. “The immediate acquisition of this amount of labor gives to the new company a most decided advantage,” and for this reason, “the Richmond and Petersburg Company will commence their work under the most favorable auspices.”

The vast majority of these laborers were black slaves, and their first task was to create a level roadbed on which the rails would be laid. “The ordinary method of

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64 Majewski, 88.
getting roads graded,” writes railroad historian Howard D. Dozier, “was to let out
sections by contract. The contractors hired slaves from their owners for a specified
sum and board and clothing for a year.”66 In February of 1837, C. O. Sanford,
Principal Assistant Engineer of the R&P, reported that “contracts have been entered
into for the whole work,” and that the “contractors are vigorously employed in
executing” their assignments. Leveling the line was backbreaking work; slaves
moved huge amounts of earth with nothing more than shovels and wheelbarrows.
“Grading the roadbed,” writes historian Scott Reynolds Nelson, “was the longest and
most onerous part of railway building.”67 In May of 1837, the company declared that
half the route had been graded. Engineer Sanford reported that about 300 men and
100 carts were employed in this effort, and that “the earth-work has generally been
very favorable; the excavations dry, and the road-way firm.”

Once the roadbed was adequate, the actual track, or superstructure, was laid
upon it. First, oak sills, or crossties, were set down transversely in five-foot
intervals. Two wooden rails were then placed across the sills, and a thin iron strap
was spiked atop each rail. The gauge, or the distance between the iron-plated rails,
was 4 feet, 8 ½ inches.68 In May of 1837, Engineer Sanford reported that “the rail-
way superstructure was under contract,” and 50 hands were employed along the
route in this regard. In his book Iron Confederacies, historian Scott Reynolds Nelson
describes how slaves laid track on antebellum Southern railroads:

> When laying track, workers in gangs of five or more sang songs to
> help them time and spread out their exertions. At the end of a phrase,

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66 Dozier, 89.
67 Nelson, 17.
68 Report to the R&P board of directors, February, 1837.
all the men on the line would hammer in the rail at the same time. This ensured that the rail hewed evenly to the crossties.  

While the slaves were hard at work constructing the line, the United States plunged into economic depression. The Panic of 1837 dealt a severe blow to the fledgling R&P. “The operations of this Company during the past year,” reported president Holden Rhodes, “have been carried on under circumstances of great difficulty, arising wholly from the disordered condition of credit and currency of the country.” With the road under contract, suspension of work would result in “very serious losses to all concerned.” To finance construction, the board of directors requested funds from the private stockholders. However, this method proved ineffective, as the shareholders, “suffering in their private affairs under the general distress,” struggled to pay. To relieve the stockholders from this burden, the R&P attempted to sell coupon bonds in Europe, but only ten were sold. A larger, more reliable source of capital was needed if the R&P was to survive.

Before the Panic, in January of 1837, the General Assembly had authorized the Board of Public Works to subscribe for $200,000 of R&P stock. Actual payment, however, was evidently slow in coming; a year later, in January of 1838, Virginia’s Governor Campbell reported that the R&P “will find great difficulty in prosecuting their work, unless the State should consent to advance them the balance of the subscription to their stock, amounting to about eighty-six thousand dollars.”

During the depression, the state not only paid the railroad this amount, but also

69 Nelson, 17.
70 1838 R&P Annual Report.
71 Ibid.
72 1837 R&P Annual report.
73 Richmond Enquirer January 2, 1838.
loaned the company $150,000. Interestingly, when the R&P applied for the loan, the line’s president, William H. Macfarland, was acting as Virginia’s lieutenant governor in the absence of the governor. Finding it “incompatible with his nice sense of propriety to complete, while he held the office of President of this Company, the forms of the loan which the Governor had previously ordered,” Macfarland resigned the presidency and ceased to be a stockholder in the railroad.\textsuperscript{74} That Macfarland held positions in both the R&P and the Virginia government reveals just how connected the line was to the state. When the act granting the loan was passed, the railroad’s board of directors waited to accept it, “not doubting that the General Assembly would make such changes in the law as would enable the company to obtain the loan without loss.”\textsuperscript{75} The extent to which the legislature aided the R&P during the Panic of 1837 is striking.

Financial trouble was not the only issue that slowed construction. In February of 1837, Moncure Robinson observed that “it is now much more difficult, than it was at the opening of the Petersburg Railroad (in consequence of the great competition for workmen) to obtain in our southern country either steam engineers or mechanics.” This lack of trained personnel prompted Robinson, as chief engineer of the R&P, to travel to England. While there, he wrote his brother Conway, who was president of the RF&P, that he hoped “to ship to Richmond as speedily as possible a machinist, two or three engineers and as many mechanics” as could be induced to cross the Atlantic. “I fear in regard to engines and cars,” he continued “we shall not do\textsuperscript{well} until we have a locomotive engine manufactory connected with our

\textsuperscript{74} 1838 R&P Annual Report.
\textsuperscript{75} 1839 R&P Annual Report.
Petersburg and Richmond Rail Road, or otherwise in Richmond.”76 In the absence of such a factory, Robinson was forced to order steam locomotives from England. By 1838, the R&P reported that three of these fire-breathing machines were operating over the line.77

With enough funding, rolling stock, and trained personnel, construction continued. On May 16, 1838, trains began running from Manchester to Pocahontas, a point directly across the Appomattox River from Petersburg. “Away we sped as if on the wings of the wind to Richmond,” recalled a passenger riding north from Pocahontas. “The ease and velocity of our travel, the unremitting attention of the captain of the train, and the large and commodious cars, so much superior to any we had heretofore seen, made our ride a most delightful one. Pleasure sat on every face.”78 When “the splendid Bridge over the James River” was completed in September, trains steamed into downtown Richmond.

“Before it had been in operation two years,” writes Howard D. Dozier, the railroad “had secured three fourths of the traffic which had formerly gone via the James and Appomattox Rivers between the two cities, Richmond and Petersburg.”79 Tobacco, “which formerly came from Petersburg to Richmond by lighters,” or small boats, “now comes entirely by Railroad.”80 The R&P also had a virtual monopoly on overland trade between the two fall line communities. Concerned that a railroad would reduce travel over its gravel roadway, the Manchester & Petersburg Turnpike

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76 Letter, Moncure Robinson to Conway, February 5, 1837.
77 1838 R&P Annual Report.
78 American Constellation May 29, 1838.
79 Dozier, 84.
had petitioned the General Assembly for an act authorizing that company to build its own railroad from Richmond to Petersburg. This request, presented at the same session of the legislature at which the R&P received its charter, was rejected. Instead, the turnpike’s shareholders could transfer their stock to the R&P and receive fair compensation. Through this process, the R&P became the new owner of the Manchester & Petersburg Turnpike.

Historian Scott Reynolds Nelson states that Southern railroads, typically hauling agricultural produce from plantations to a city, “depended on the unstable international prices of tobacco and cotton to maintain operations.” In 1840, the R&P reported an increase in freight revenue due to the “heavy tobacco crop of year.” However, two years later, the company lamented that “the low price of tobacco during the spring has induced the planters to hold it back, so that the number of hogsheads this year is about 2,500 less than the number carried last year.” Unlike most Southern railroads, the R&P connected two cities, and was therefore not dependent on agricultural freight. The company reported in 1842, for example, that freight brought in $20,007, while local passenger travel made the company $33,861. The early R&P, therefore, made most of its money by hauling passengers between Richmond and Petersburg.

81 Nelson, 14.
82 1840 R&P Annual Report.
83 1843 R&P Annual Report.
84 1842 R&P Annual Report.
Statement of R&P income from its first seven years of operation. (1853 Annual Report)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Local Travel</th>
<th>Through Mail Pay. Travel.</th>
<th>Main Road. Branch Road Freight.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1838 to 1839</td>
<td>41,713.19</td>
<td>7,833.03</td>
<td>2,540.24</td>
<td>51,196.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839 to 1840</td>
<td>39,473.16</td>
<td>6,450.45</td>
<td>5,794.48</td>
<td>51,514.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840 to 1841</td>
<td>33,861.16</td>
<td>5,531.64</td>
<td>5,311.28</td>
<td>45,530.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841 to 1842</td>
<td>38,908.68</td>
<td>5,446.25</td>
<td>5,111.28</td>
<td>49,866.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842 to 1843</td>
<td>23,078.88</td>
<td>5,383.25</td>
<td>5,115.28</td>
<td>33,578.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843 to 1844</td>
<td>24,772.73</td>
<td>5,411.28</td>
<td>5,381.64</td>
<td>35,567.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844 to 1845</td>
<td>23,858.10</td>
<td>5,794.48</td>
<td>4,762.26</td>
<td>34,510.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: $51,976.69
In 1840, Virginia ranked third in the United States in total railroad mileage.\textsuperscript{85} “Qualitatively,” writes James A. Ward, “the South equaled or exceeded the national average capitalization per mile between 1837 and 1842.” Put simply, “during the first hectic decade of railroad construction the South was able to fund its projects on a par with other regions.”\textsuperscript{86} In this light, Virginia’s early railroad projects cannot be considered failures or inferior to those of the North. It is important to note, as Ward does, that much of the funding for Southern railroads, unlike the Northern lines, came from state governments.

Construction of the R&P cost $743,410, or about $33,791 per mile.\textsuperscript{87} This enormous sum exceeded the company’s total capitalization by more than $200,000. In 1840, the R&P was still “in debt to the Commonwealth in the sum of $148,065.83 for money loaned,” and its stock was valued “much below par.”\textsuperscript{88} President Coates argued to the Board of Public Works that “the action of the Legislature in some form, at an early day, seems to be necessary to avert the disastrous effects on the credit of the Company.” He concluded that the “conversion of the loan into stock would be the measure best calculated to relieve the company from its embarrassments.”\textsuperscript{89} Sure enough, the state came to the rescue again. In 1843, the General Assembly passed an act that converted the state’s loan into R&P stock held by the Board of Public

\textsuperscript{86} Ward, James A. \textit{The Journal of Southern History}, Vol. 39 No. 3 (August 1973), 413.
\textsuperscript{87} 1839 R&P Annual Report.
\textsuperscript{88} 1840 R&P Annual Report.
\textsuperscript{89} 1840 R&P report to theBPW.
Works. It is important to note that this act, like state aid during the Panic of 1837, applied not only to the R&P. Such state support of multiple railroads would spark controversy as the lines began to compete in the early 1840s.

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90 1843 R&P Annual Report.
Chapter 4

“MORE SINNED AGAINST THAN SINNING”: The Railroad and Steamboat Wars of the 1840s

“The trip between Richmond and Petersburg, formerly the journey of a half a day, is now only of an hour’s duration,” observed a passenger in 1838. “Commercial enterprise is daily adding link after link to our long line of national railway – binding together distant communities as one neighborhood.”91 From its inception, the R&P was seen as a connecting line between the RF&P and Petersburg Railroads, and therefore a crucial part of the larger North to South rail route. “Above all,” wrote President Holden Rhodes, in 1838, “this improvement forms part of the great line of rail roads already nearly completed to the north, and rapidly extending itself into the south, opening, at every step, fresh sources of usefulness and profit.”92 Throughout the 1840s, the R&P competed vigorously for the through traffic on the eastern seaboard.

In 1840, the R&P reported that it was “greatly suffering in an active and necessary contest with the Chesapeake line of steamboats and the Portsmouth and Roanoke railroad company, to obtain as large a share as possible of what is termed the long travel.”93 The Portsmouth & Roanoke Railroad, chartered in 1832, extended from the coastal town of Norfolk to North Carolina’s Roanoke River Valley. “The originators of the Portsmouth road had hoped to divert the flow of tobacco and

91 American Constellation May 29, 1838.
92 1839 R&P Annual Report.
93 1840 R&P Annual Report.
other crops to the coast” at the expense of the fall line towns. The Petersburg Railroad, which also terminated on the Roanoke, relied on this freight for the majority of its income. Therefore, when the Portsmouth & Roanoke line was finished in 1837, it immediately competed with the Petersburg Railroad. The Portsmouth & Roanoke, however, relied primarily on long-distance passengers for income. Working with the Chesapeake Bay Line of steamboats, the railroad offered low rates for travel between Baltimore, Maryland, and Weldon, North Carolina. Passengers travelling over this combined rail and water route would bypass the RF&P, R&P and Petersburg lines altogether. In response, these three inland railroads formed an alliance to subdue their competition, and reduced the fare for through passenger tickets over their tracks. The Portsmouth & Roanoke retaliated by lowering ticket prices further. “How long this warfare will continue, we shall not attempt to predict,” stated the R&P in 1840, “but it must, in our opinion, soon be perceived that both lines of internal improvement cannot pay expenses.”

What makes the conflict even more interesting is that the Board of Public Works was heavily invested in all four railroads. By funding both the inland lines and the Portsmouth & Roanoke, “the State has been so far warring against herself.” Rather than intervene in the war, the Board did nothing, allowing the railroad companies to determine the outcome. In 1846, the Portsmouth & Roanoke ceased

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95 Stewart, 7.
96 Dozier, 98-99.
97 1840 R&P Annual Report.
running trains over its rails; the inland alliance had quashed its coastal rival. That the three inland railroads formed an association to compete for through traffic reveals that the individual companies viewed themselves as part of a larger transportation network. The R&P Annual Report of 1840 referred to this collection of lines as “the principal line of improvement executed within [Virginia’s] borders.”

However, the alliance soon broke down; with the Portsmouth & Roanoke defeated, the Petersburg Railroad terminated its association with the R&P and RF&P. It then made an arrangement with the James River Steamboat Line to take passengers at a low rate from Petersburg to the coast, where they could board Bay Line boats for Baltimore. “This arrangement,” declared the R&P and RF&P, was “made expressly with a view of diverting the through travel from the rail roads north of Petersburg,” as passengers travelling north or south over the new route would bypass the R&P and RF&P entirely.

Earlier, in 1841, the R&P reported that the “road labors under a disadvantage from its want of greater length, and since it “cannot be extended beyond its present terminations, the construction of branches is the only way to increase its business.” Specifically, the company’s board of directors wished to construct a branch line to navigable water, an extension provided for in the 1836 charter. “I regard the completion of the original design of the Company, in the construction of a branch to tidewater, accessible to heavy shipping, as the measure most surely to be

98 Stewart, 11.
99 Ibid; Dozier, 100.
100 Letter of Moncure and Wirt Robinson, presidents of the RF&P and R&P to the Board of Public Works, May 20, 1846.
101 1841 R&P Annual Report.
relied on” to increase income, wrote Superintendent of Transportation J. H. Hopkins in 1843.102 A point was selected on the Appomattox River on lands owned by John Walthall, and on February 16, 1844, the less than three-mile-long Port Walthall Branch was opened for business. In 1846, forty-two vessels departed with 85,962 barrels of flour and 2,272 hogsheads tobacco from the new railroad port.103 In addition to freight, “an arrangement could be made with the Norfolk boats for delivering and receiving their passengers at the railroad wharf, which alone would be a profitable business.”104 By 1846, vessels of the newly created Norfolk & Port Walthall Steamboat Association pld the waters between the coastal city and the R&P wharf.

In May of 1846, the owners of the James River Line complained that their crafts “are now opposed by Steamboats” that “are running in connexion with the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Rail Road Company, and the Richmond and Petersburg Rail Road Company transporting passengers” at “a reduced price.”105 Fearing that this combined competition would unfairly drive them out of business, the James River group, led by Robert A. Mayo, requested that the Board of Public Works investigate. “If it should appear that the boats are owned by individuals thus engaged in transporting passengers over the Rail Roads,” wrote Mayo to the Board of Public Works, “then we have not a word.”106 However, Mayo was right to be alarmed; the Port Walthall Association was organized specifically by the RF&P and

102 1843 Annual Report.
103 1846 Annual Report.
104 1842 Annual report.
105 Memorial of Robert A. Mayo to the BPW, May 7, 1846.
106 Ibid.
R&P to reclaim the through traffic from the James River Line. John Williams, treasurer of the R&P, stated that “the business of the association is managed by the president of the railroad.” 107 The RF&P held 125 of its 350 total shares, and was “enabled to exercise a sufficient influence in the Association.”108 The two railroad companies made an arrangement by which “the receipts for any travel going through from Norfolk” by boat to Port Walthall and thence by rail “to the District of Columbia accrue entirely to the Steamboat Association, for the period of two years.”109 When this agreement ended, profits were to be divided between the three companies. By supporting the steamboat line financially, the R&P and RF&P ensured its survival against competition, thereby securing traffic for their trains.

To defend their actions to the Board of Public Works, the presidents of the RF&P and R&P argued that “the Rail Road Companies between Port Walthall and Washington have been much 'more sinned against than sinning.'”110 If the arrangement between the Petersburg Railroad and the James River and Bay Lines persisted, “the lines of railroad in which the State has so large an interest between Petersburg and Washington would be kept impoverished and possibly in a disabled condition.” In other words, continued competition would prove harmful not only to the railroad companies but to the state as well. The Port Walthall Association, therefore, was “an important protection” against this “injury with which they have

108 Letter of Moncure and Wirt Robinson, presidents of the RF&P and R&P to the Board of Public Works, May 20, 1846.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
1848 map of Virginia railroads. (Library of Congress)
been threatened.” Both sides assumed that the Board of Public Works would solve the situation, and crafted arguments that would resonate with this government entity. “We feel assured that you, as the guardians of the State’s interest in all works of internal improvement,” wrote Mayo and the James River Line, “will inquire into the grievance here set forth, and not allow the capital of the State to be used in putting down the enterprise of its private citizens.” In response, the RF&P and R&P alleged that the Baltimore-based Bay Line largely directed the James River steamboat company. Therefore, they concluded that it was ridiculous for an out-of-state transportation company to “enlist the sympathies of the Board of Public Works in their behalf” in order to “divert the legitimate travel of a line which the State of Virginia and its citizens have expended millions on constructing!”

In January of 1847, the warring parties were summoned to the Virginia State Capital where they expressed their views before a legislative committee. However, the hearing failed to end the competition; the Board of Public Works did not act. “The Board’s lack of assertiveness was particularly striking in cases of controversies between companies,” writes Carter Goodrich. When Robert A. Mayo first petitioned the Board, it disclaimed the “extensive powers” to investigate the Port Walthall Association but agreed to “respectfully request” information from the

111 Ibid.
112 Memorial of Robert A. Mayo to the BPW, May 7, 1846.
113 Letter of Moncure and Wirt Robinson, presidents of the RF&P and R&P to the Board of Public Works, May 20, 1846.
114 Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia, Session 1846-1847, 751
railroad companies.\cite{116} In such situations, it had been impotent from its inception.

“The Board was not an over-all planning agency charged with the primary responsibility for creating an integrated transportation network.”\cite{117} Rather, “its intent was to decentralize initiative and direction,” thereby facilitating individual transportation projects. “By leaving the initiative to local enterprise, the state was to have avoided much of the necessity of deciding between ‘contending interests.’” Like the earlier conflict between the Portsmouth & Roanoke and the inland railroads, the Board’s inaction meant that the individual companies controlled the outcome of the Port Walthall struggle. The issue of who controlled the R&P, however, sparked controversy amongst its stockholders.

At the R&P annual meeting of 1846, Judge John F. May of Petersburg moved to terminate the railroad’s connection with the Norfolk & Port Walthall Association. He stated that continued support of the steamboat line would “increase the heavy embarrassments of this Company,” already very much in debt.\cite{118} However, May was voted down. He subsequently composed a letter to the Board of Public Works expressing the concerns of the R&P stockholders from Petersburg. “Several of us have occasionally attended the Annual Meetings,” wrote May, “but we are so utterly powerless there, that we have felt that any effort of ours would be vain and useless.”\cite{119} To make decisions, the railroad’s stockholders cast votes in proportion to the amount of shares they held. At the meeting in which May’s motion was rejected, “the State gave 394 votes, Moncure Robinson Esq. about 396, and all others

\begin{footnotes}
\item[116] Memorial of Robert A. Mayo to the BPW, May 7, 1846.
\item[117] Goodrich, 383.
\item[118] 1846 R&P Annual Report.
\item[119] Letter of J. F. May and others to the BPW, May 13, 1846.
\end{footnotes}
about 407” combined. Moncure Robinson was also heavily invested in both the RF&P and Port Walthall Association. What is more, during the Port Walthall controversy, Robinson was president of the RF&P and his cousin, Wirt Robinson, held that office in the R&P. This does much to explain the alliance between the two railroads, and evidence suggests that Moncure Robinson exerted substantial influence throughout the steamboat struggle.\textsuperscript{120}

“Now, we take it for granted,” read a Petersburg newspaper, “that there is no citizen of Petersburg so inattentive to passing events as not to know what is the object” of the Port Walthall Association. “It is an attempt to break down the [James] river line all together, and throw travel on the Fredericksburg road.”\textsuperscript{121} Robinson’s plan to secure traffic for his railroads sent passengers through Richmond by way of Port Walthall, bypassing Petersburg entirely. This was particularly troubling to the residents of Petersburg. “Each railroad when projected was expected to promote the economic growth of its sponsoring community or at least to defend it against the incursions of another.”\textsuperscript{122} The R&P, however, connected two communities, and the Port Walthall controversy raised the question of whether the railroad would chiefly benefit Richmond or Petersburg.

Rivalries between Virginia’s cities had existed since their settlement. The earlier battle between the Portsmouth & Roanoke and the allied inland railroads had been a victory for Richmond and Petersburg over the coastal town Norfolk. The Port Walthall controversy now pitted the two fall line towns against each other in a

\textsuperscript{120} Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia, Session 1846-1847, 751-852.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 788.
\textsuperscript{122} Stewart, 4.
struggle for supremacy. Judge May correctly believed that the Richmond interests in the R&P had the upper hand. He informed the Board of Public Works that, while a train ran daily from Richmond to Port Walthall “to aid this Steamboat concern,” the Petersburg people “have been unable to procure the transmission of the mail in the accommodation train, when it arrived in Richmond too late for the mail train. This, it was said, would involve an expense which we had no right to entail on the Company.” While the R&P denied withholding the mail, it nonetheless asserted that the Petersburg interests could not “consider it a grievance” that, holding “scarcely one-eighth of the whole capital of the Company,” they “are not allowed to control its measures.”123 For those living in Petersburg, “the real problem was that most Richmonders somehow assumed that their city should be the economic hub of the state.”124

It is significant that the R&P competed so vigorously for through passengers when the income from this source was much less than that from local travel. From May of 1846 to May of 1847, for example, tickets sold to local passengers brought in $29,085, while those sold to through travelers amounted to only $9,428.125 Moncure Robinson, who resided in Philadelphia, most likely believed that securing the long travel would yield large profits in the future. For stockholders residing in Richmond and Petersburg, through travelers brought more than just the promise of positive returns. Since the distance between the two cities was less than two hours by rail, local travelers could return to their point of origin the same day. “A citizen of

123 Letter of Wirt Robinson to the BPW, June 13, 1846.
124 Stewart, 17.
125 1847 Annual Report.
Petersburg, who wishes to hear a speech in the Legislature, has nothing to do but to step into the Cars” and ride to Richmond, reported the Petersburg Intelligencer. “After he is satiated with eloquence,” he could ride the train home “without having to encounter a tavern bill.” Long distance passengers, however, were more likely to spend time in Richmond or Petersburg and therefore patronize local businesses. More importantly, through travel connected the two fall line cities to national routes of transportation, thereby increasing their regional importance. Ultimately, the intense competition for long travel reveals that those guiding the R&P intentionally made the line part of an extended system of commerce so that it would benefit local interests.

126 April 20, 1838 Petersburg Intelligencer, reprinted in the April 24 1838 Richmond Enquirer.
Chapter 5

“IT HAS AS YET REALIZED NO PROFIT”:
Financial Trouble in the Late 1840s and Early 1850s

The year after Judge John F. May complained to the Board of Public Works that Petersburg lacked sufficient influence in the R&P, the railroad’s stockholders voted him to the company’s board of directors. The line’s management was composed of a president, superintendent, treasurer and five directors. When the Board of Public Works had subscribed for two-fifths of the total stock in 1837, it earned the right to appoint two of these five directors. Like its policy towards competition between companies, the state did not seek to govern the railroad through these men. “The Board’s general practice,” writes Carter Goodrich, “was to choose from the list of the company’s stockholders someone known to the Board personally or by reputation, or recommended by members of the legislature or officers of the company.” In addition, “there was often an interchange of personnel between the roles of state representative and company official.” 127 Holden Rhodes, for example, served as R&P president from 1837 to 1839, as a state director from 1842 through 1848, and as a director on behalf of the private stockholders from 1849 through 1856. 128 That a stockholder could serve as a company official one year and a state director another reveals, yet again, that the railroad largely governed itself.

At the R&P annual meeting of 1848, the Board of Public Works appointed Nathaniel M. Martin third director on behalf of the state. However, the “private

127 Goodrich, 378-379.
128 R&P Annual Reports.
stockholders felt it was their right, not the state’s, to appoint a 3rd director, and so they refused Martin his seat at the board.” The state held more than one half but less than three fifths of the railroad’s total stock. “The question was, therefore,” wrote R&P President Wirt Robinson, “whether in such circumstances the state should have more or less than its proportionate share in the directory, there being no means of giving to it its exact proportion.”

After being denied his seat on the R&P board of directors, Martin “made an examination into the affairs and management of the Company,” which culminated in a lengthy letter to the Board of Public Works. He stated that the R&P annual reports did not “get at the true situation of the company,” and argued that the railroad was actually losing money and digging itself deeper into debt. The fundamental problem, he concluded, was that “the road is not well managed.”

Martin viewed “the connection of the Company to the Port Walthall Steamboat Association” as the most blatant evidence to support his claim. Analyzing company records, he argued that both the branch to the Appomattox and the steamboat arrangement had failed to pay back expenses, but considered these “small evils compared with what this steamboat connection will cost us ultimately if it be continued.” The Port Walthall Association, he believed, would cause the R&P to lose $15,000 per year, and that “nobody is to be benefitted by it except the persons by whose votes and influence it was imposed upon the company.” Copies of Martin’s letter were spread among R&P stockholders as far away as Philadelphia by “a

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129 1849 annual report.
130 R&P response to the General Assembly, January 9, 1849.
131 Letter of N. M. Martin to the BPW, Oct. 17, 1848.
gentleman highly connected” with the Petersburg Railroad. In response, R&P
management stated that Martin’s claims were “gratuitous and unfounded,” called
him a “fault-finder” and suggested that he was motivated by personal interests in
the competing Petersburg Railroad. In regard to the Port Walthall Association, R&P
President Wirt Robinson stated that “it has effectted the objects for which it was
designed,” as the competing James River Steamboat Line was defeated in August in
1848. However, Robinson also admitted “that it has as yet realized no profit.”132

Through travelers were not the only cargo accommodated at Port Walthall; the
majority of the ships that anchored at the railroad wharf were loaded with
bituminous coal. The area west of Richmond was the first coal-producing region of
the United States. In 1763, the Richmond basin shipped 102 tons of coal to
Philadelphia, 232 tons to Boston, and 247 tons to New York City.133 According to
historian Sean Adams, the overall production of the Richmond coal basin fell behind
that of Pennsylvania’s anthracite coalfields during the 1820s. Adams asserts that as
Pennsylvania anthracite rose in popularity, Richmond colliers “did not respond at
all.”134 While the Richmond basin would never equal Pennsylvania’s output,
individual colliers outside of Virginia’s capital city, however, made real efforts to
increase their production during the 1830s. Coal was initially carried slowly over
turnpikes or piled on barges and floated down the James River Canal into Richmond.
In 1831, Moncure Robinson supervised construction the Chesterfield Railroad,
which ran thirteen miles from the coal mines to banks of the James River at

132 R&P response to the General Assembly, January 9, 1849.
133 Adams, Sean Patrick. Old Dominion, Industrial Commonwealth, (The Johns Hopkins
University Press, 2004), 27.
134 Ibid. 80.
Manchester. When completed, the Chesterfield Railroad became the first rail line to operate in Virginia. The railroad owned no locomotives; its trains were powered entirely by gravity:

A large embankment at the mine began the all downhill 13-mile run to the river. When the loaded cars neared the river, a block and tackle system was attached to empty cars at the docks. The empty cars were then pulled uphill by the weight of the loaded cars. Two mules, which rode in the last coal car, were then used to pull the empty cars back to the pits.135

The little railroad hauled over 30,000 tons each year.136 When the R&P was constructed, the company made an arrangement with the Chesterfield Railroad to haul its coal into Richmond. The track of the R&P passed under that of the gravity railroad, so coal could be dropped from the cars of the Chesterfield Railroad into those of the R&P.137

In 1839, heavy rains exposed a coal bed on the plantation of James H. Cox, located in the southern region of the Richmond coal basin. Soon after, Cox organized the Clover Hill Mining and Manufacturing Company, which operated two 240-foot-deep vertical shaft mines. Coal, mined by slaves, was raised from the shafts by a stationary steam engine and hauled by mules to the Appomattox River, where it was piled onto boats for Petersburg.138 To reduce the expenses of transportation, an eighteen-mile long railroad was constructed from the mines to the R&P. Opened in August of 1845, the Clover Hill Railroad operated as a branch line of the R&P; coal was hauled over the line in trains owned by the R&P, while the Clover Hill Railroad

137 1388 R&P Annual Report.
138 Wilkes, 29.
Company charged a toll for the use of their line and were responsible for keeping it in repair. By May of 1846, less than a year after the Clover Hill line had been opened, seventy-six vessels were loaded with over 7,500 tons of coal at Port Walthall.\footnote{139 \textit{1846 R&P Annual Report}.} Ships laden with coal left Port Walthall for cities on the east coast. In 1852, Frederick Law Olmsted visited a Richmond basin coal pit. “The coal from these beds,” he reported, “is of special value for gas manufacture, and is shipped, for that purpose, to all the large towns on the Atlantic seaboard, even to beyond Boston.”\footnote{140 Olmsted, 55.} In this light, the transportation of coal is further evidence that the R&P was part of an extended, rather than local, network of commerce.

In 1849, R&P locomotives hauled 47,085 tons of coal from the Clover Hill mines, and 202 from the Chesterfield Railroad.\footnote{141 \textit{Calculated from 1849 R&P Annual Report}.} This cargo was distributed between Port Walthall, Richmond and Petersburg. From 1845 to 1853, the transportation of coal made up 24\% of the railroad’s income.\footnote{142 \textit{Calculated from 1853 R&P Annual Report}.} However, in 1848, N. M. Martin stated that the R&P was actually losing money transporting the fossil fuel and advised the company to charge a more remunerative rate. Although the R&P simply dismissed this, stating that the Clover Hill Railroad claimed that the rates were too high, Martin was right. “I am firmly convinced,” wrote R&P Superintendent Thomas Dodamead five years later, in 1853, “that you have heretofore been transporting coal at a rate below the actual cost.”\footnote{143 \textit{Report to the R&P President and Directors, 1853}.} Treasurer John Williams concurred, and calculated that the railroad had lost as much as $121,389 in
eight years, a huge sum considering that the total income for those years was $835,557. In 1848, Martin had alleged that the “persons in our Company who established the rates for carrying coal, were at the time or became shortly after it, largely interested in the Coal trade and they may have fixed them too low.”

James H. Cox, owner of the Clover Hill Mining Company, had been an R&P director on behalf of the state since 1850. Perhaps, wanting to reduce transportation expenses for his coal, he was in some way behind the low rates, although there is no evidence to support this. Regardless, in 1854, the R&P raised its rates on coal.

In 1848, N. M. Martin stated that other Virginia railroads, “which do not enjoy near as much business as ours, are making money and paying their debts,” and that the lines at either end of the R&P, the RF&P and the Petersburg Railroad, “are paying good dividends.” That same year, the R&P state directors reported back to the Board of Public Works that “in the course of the ensuing year, $33,000 of its permanent debt will become due, and the question arises, Can they pay it? We feel confident that there is not the least hope of their doing so.” The income from transportation would be used to pay for both the ordinary operating expenses of the railroad and interest due to the state. In addition, “they cannot, we presume, borrow the money, as the state holds a mortgage on their property.” In short, the R&P was “in want of legislative aid” once again.

In 1853, the General Assembly

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144 Letter of N. M. Martin to the BPW, Oct. 17, 1848.
145 1850-1853 R&P Annual Reports.
146 1854 R&P Annual Report.
147 Letter of N. M. Martin to the BPW, Oct. 17, 1848.
148 1848 report of the R&P state directors to BPW.
### Statement of income in eight years, from May 1845 to May 1853.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Local Travel</th>
<th>Through Travel</th>
<th>Mail Pay</th>
<th>Main Road Freight</th>
<th>Branch Road Freight</th>
<th>Clover Hill Travel and Freight</th>
<th>Norfolk Travel and Freight</th>
<th>Coal Freight</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1845 to 1846</td>
<td>26,923 87</td>
<td>9,792 17</td>
<td>5,814 48</td>
<td>18,648 36</td>
<td>5,484 07</td>
<td>747 04</td>
<td>11,458 08</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1846 to 1847</td>
<td>29,085 03</td>
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<td>5,818 48</td>
<td>17,609 39</td>
<td>5,408 76</td>
<td>1,678 78</td>
<td>2,563 15</td>
<td>24,418 57</td>
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<tr>
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<td>20,265 75</td>
<td>6,815 65</td>
<td>2,385 86</td>
<td>3,112 48</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848 to 1849</td>
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<td>2,868 12</td>
<td>16,644 08</td>
<td>8,964 94</td>
<td>2,100 47</td>
<td>5,362 50</td>
<td>26,663 84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849 to 1850</td>
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<td>11,054 90</td>
<td>5,818 48</td>
<td>18,137 48</td>
<td>5,956 18</td>
<td>2,393 24</td>
<td>3,572 87</td>
<td>25,045 00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>5,810 48</td>
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<td>2,738 02</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13,550 04</td>
<td>6,072 74</td>
<td>17,563 43</td>
<td>7,066 21</td>
<td>1,968 01</td>
<td>3,441 60</td>
<td>23,883 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1852 to 1853</td>
<td>35,655 97</td>
<td>18,687 13</td>
<td>7,345 55</td>
<td>23,243 13</td>
<td>7,962 43</td>
<td>1,900 31</td>
<td>3,156 66</td>
<td>28,038 03</td>
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</table>

**Local travel,** 245,319 70  
**Through travel,** 99,169 78  
**Mail pay,** 45,920 80  
**Main road freight,** 150,981 59  
**Branch road freight,** 56,212 56  
**Clover Hill travel and freight,** 15,912 33  
**Norfolk travel and freight,** 25,093 52

**Total,** 637,940 28 of 7 sources of income in eight years.

**Total, 197,616 72 coal freight in eight years.**

**Total, 835,557 00**
acknowledged that "it is an object that the debts of the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad Company should be converted into stock, and the Company thereby be placed in a condition to pay dividends." The legislature passed an act that authorized the company to sell additional shares of capital stock for at least $50. However, R&P stock was valued so low that it wouldn’t sell at $50, and the company decided to issue bonds instead.\textsuperscript{149} The R&P used the proceeds from these bonds to greatly reduce its debt.

In 1848, N. M. Martin reported that the track of the R&P was “decidedly worse” than that of other railroads. The wooden rails with iron straps that were initially used on the road wore out quickly, especially as locomotives and cars became larger and heavier. The track therefore required constant maintenance, and was an endless source of expense. Martin alleged that R&P management squandered funds performing these repairs. On one occasion, he observed workmen “taking up the old track in various places, and laying a new one upon an entirely different plan.” However, “this kind of track was not suffered to remain long, before it was torn up and laid upon the old plan.” Martin concluded that such haphazard repairs “must have caused a great and needless increase of expense.”\textsuperscript{150} Using proceeds from the 1853 bonds, the R&P began to relay its line with solid iron rails, which were much more durable than those of wood.\textsuperscript{151} To help the railroad in this effort, the General Assembly passed an act in 1854 that authorized the company to issue additional

\textsuperscript{149} An Act in relation to the Richmond and Petersburg Rail Road (March 24, 1853), in the 1853 R&P Annual Report.
\textsuperscript{150} Letter of N. M. Martin to the BPW, Oct. 17, 1848.
\textsuperscript{151} 1854 R&P Annual Report.
bonds “to such an extent as may be requisite to enable the said Company to complete an edge-rail superstructure over the whole length of their railroad.”\textsuperscript{152}

Evidence suggests that the R&P management was partly responsible for the line’s financial troubles in the late 1840s and early 1850s. However, in 1854, the railroad’s board of directors stated that the company had “commenced its operations with a capital stock wholly inadequate to the business it has since undertaken,” and had used the “earnings of its business” to supply that monetary deficiency. “This fact alone,” concluded the R&P management, “sufficiently accounts for the failure of the Company heretofore to pay dividends.”\textsuperscript{153} With new iron rails, higher rates on coal, and state aid that greatly reduced its debt, the R&P issued its first private dividend in 1855, signaling that it was a financially successful line.\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{AN ACT Authorizing the issue of seven per cent. bonds by the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad.} (Feb 18, 1854), in the 1854 R&P Annual Report.
\textsuperscript{153} 1854 R&P Annual Report.
\textsuperscript{154} 1855 R&P Annual Report.
Chapter 6

“Outwitted Her Rivals”: The Nature of Success

From 1856 to 1860, the R&P was the most profitable line in the state of Virginia. Throughout this period, the company paid regular dividends and made more money per mile than any other railroad in the state. In 1857, for example, the line brought in $84,872 from passengers and $62,638 by freight, earning $7,373 per mile. The railroad with second highest income per mile, the Richmond & Danville Railroad, brought in only $3,246 per mile.\(^\text{155}\) R&P success however, involved more than just making money; the line accomplished the goals of its designers and chief supporters.

In the 1836 charter, the General Assembly had prohibited the company from “extending the railroad along any of the streets of the said city of Richmond or town of Petersburg.”\(^\text{156}\) In Richmond, the R&P terminated just beyond the banks of the James River, blocks away from the RF&P station. Its southern terminus was at Pocahontas, directly across the Appomattox from Petersburg, and therefore quite distant from the Petersburg Railroad’s depot. This separation between railroad stations created quite a hassle for through travelers. In 1850, the Petersburg Railroad reported that:

> Much complaint and objection have recently been urged by travelers against the railroad route between Washington and Weldon [NC], alleging that in consequence of the distance which separates the depot

\(^\text{155}\) 1857 Annual Report of the Railroad Companies of the State of Virginia, 428. The compiler misplaced a decimal point when calculating the R&P’s earnings per mile, using 221 miles instead of 22.1. I corrected this error in my calculation.

\(^\text{156}\) R&P charter, 1836.
of the Petersburg railroad from the depot of the Richmond and Petersburg railroad, they frequently experience great inconvenience and difficulty in passing with their baggage from one to the other, and that they often find very inadequate conveyance, and sometimes ladies and children are compelled to encounter on foot the dust or mud, or all the severities of season and weather.157

In 1853, R&P Superintendent Thomas Dodamead reported that the company owned twelve horses, three baggage and mail wagons, and three street wagons, to move passengers through Richmond. In addition, the R&P and the RF&P co-owned two horse drawn omnibuses “which are used for the Transportation of Passengers, Mail and Baggage” between the two railroads’ stations.158

As early as 1835, before rails stretched from Richmond to Petersburg, Moncure Robinson argued that a line built between the two fall line cities should connect with the RF&P.159 In 1849, the R&P state directors argued to the Board of Public Works that:

To give popularity to the inland route, it is absolutely necessary to have the roads connected in Petersburg and Richmond. With such connections, the through passenger might have his baggage locked up in a car at Wilmington and instead of having to look after it in Weldon, Petersburg and Richmond, as is now the case — and generally in the nighttime too, in Petersburg, — make his mind easy about it until he arrived in Washington. Besides this, there is a heavy loss of time to the passengers, in both Richmond and Petersburg, in getting from one depot to the other.160

The 1836 charter allowed the R&P to extend its track into Richmond or Petersburg only “with the consent of the common council of the said city or town.”161 That

157 Report of the Petersburg Railroad, inside the 1850 R&P report to the BPW.
158 1854 R&P Annual Report.
160 Report of the R&P state directors to BPW, 1849.
161 1836 R&P charter.
physical links between rail lines were not constructed, despite the urging of the railroad companies, reveals that there was substantial local opposition.

“Merchants,” writes John Majewski, “had no desire to see their city become another stop on the line.”

The lack of physical connection between railroads in Richmond and Petersburg meant that through passengers were forced to disembark in town, and were therefore likely to patronize local businesses. In addition, the breaks in the rail network meant that freight had to be unloaded as well, ensuring that the fall line towns remained regional processing and distribution centers. These “inland cities,” writes Scott Reynolds Nelson, “owed their existence to this dispersed and ungainly system of trade.”

Such intentional fragmentation of the rail network reveals that Virginia’s antebellum lines were designed to benefit individual cities.

In 1835, Moncure Robinson stated that a rail line between Richmond and Petersburg would chiefly benefit Richmond. It is important to note that the R&P was quite different from the waterways and turnpike that had carried traffic between the two fall line towns before it. Whereas individuals or multiple companies hauled cargo over the turnpike or rivers, the R&P charter had granted the company “the exclusive right of transportation” over its road. By determining when trains run, what they carry, and where their cargo is taken, the company directed the flow of trade. Therefore, whoever controlled the railroad determined which city would benefit. Although contested by Petersburg during the Port Walthall crisis of the mid 1840s, the Richmond interests remained firmly in control. “By the early 1850s,”

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162 Majewski, 134.
163 Nelson, 28.
164 1836 charter.
1861 map of Richmond showing the different rail lines entering the city. (Scott, Appendix A)
Richmond had “outwitted her rivals,” and “Petersburg was forced to send most of her goods and passengers on to Richmond.”

“Richmond,” observed Frederick Law Olmsted in 1853, “at a glance from adjacent high ground, through a dull cloud of bituminous smoke, upon a lowering winter’s day, has a very picturesque appearance.” From its 1830 population of 16,000, Virginia’s capital had grown to 27,000 in 1850 and 37,000 by 1860. The falls of the James River provided ample waterpower for mills and factories, and four railroads terminated in the city by the mid-1850s. Although much smaller than Northern cities like Philadelphia or Boston, John Majewski writes that “Richmond had earned its reputation as the ‘Lowell of the South.’”

View of Richmond showing the James River Canal at left and the R&P bridge over the James River at right. From Henry Howe, Historical Collections of Virginia. (Charleston, S.C.: William R. Babcock, 1852), 244.

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165 Stewart, 15.
166 Olmsted, 40.
168 Majewski, 161.
In 1857, the R&P carried a total of 2,742 tons of freight southward from Richmond to Petersburg. This cargo consisted of mostly manufactured products: 4,138 kegs of nails and spikes, 261,120 lbs of machinery and castings, 265,462 lbs of iron, 208 hogsheads of sugar and 8,476 barrels of whiskey. That same year, R&P locomotives hauled 11,719 tons of freight northward from Petersburg to Richmond. Unlike those leaving Virginia’s capital city, these trains were laden with agricultural produce, including 4,513 bales of cotton, 10,126 hogsheads of tobacco, 10,683 lbs of leather and 20,821 bushels of wheat.¹⁶⁹ These raw materials fed Richmond’s factories on the James, including the Gallego Mills, which was the largest wheat-milling establishment in the United States.¹⁷⁰ In 1857, Petersburg also returned to Richmond 11,901 empty flour barrels and 8,778 empty liquor barrels. That Petersburg supplied raw materials that Richmond returned as manufactured goods reveals that Petersburg, and its surrounding area, had become the hinterland of Virginia’s capital city. Whereas both fall line towns had been regional trade hubs before being connected by rail, the R&P helped establish Richmond as the commercial center of Virginia.

Although the R&P chiefly served Richmond, the line benefited Petersburg as well. While the majority of the coal extracted from the Clover Hill Mines went to Port Walthall and Richmond, a substantial amount was carried to Petersburg. In 1857, for example, 19,097 tons were shipped to Richmond, 17,484 tons were taken by ship from Port Walthall, and 8,305 tons were unloaded in Petersburg.¹⁷¹ Much of

¹⁶⁹ 1857 R&P Annual Report.
¹⁷⁰ Majewski, 162.
### Statement of R&P Income 1853-1859

#### 1853-

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<th>Month</th>
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<th>Miscellaneous Receipts</th>
<th>Express Freight and Mail</th>
<th>United States Mail</th>
<th>Passenger Fare</th>
<th>Total Number of Passengers</th>
<th>Closer Hill South</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>Closer Hill Total</th>
<th>Freight from Hill to Clover</th>
<th>Freight to and from Clover</th>
<th>Coal from Clover Hill</th>
<th>Total Tonnage</th>
<th>Freight from Hill to Clover</th>
<th>Freight to and from Clover</th>
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<td>7,500</td>
<td>280,000</td>
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</table>

**Total:** 1500,000  
**Total Freight:** 100,000  
**Total Coal:** 50,000  
**Total Tonnage:** 200,000  
**Total Freight from Hill to Clover:** 40,000  
**Total Freight to and from Clover:** 60,000  
**Total Coal from Clover Hill:** 10,000  
**Total Freight from Clover Hill:** 30,000  
**Total Freight from Clover Hill:** 50,000  

*Note: The data represents the revenue and expenses for the Richmond and Petersburgh Railroad for the fiscal year ending April 30, 1859.*
this coal fueled the furnaces of Petersburg’s “important if comparatively small iron industry.” In 1857, the city shipped 228,830 lbs of iron to Richmond. The physical breaks in the rail system at Petersburg ensured that the city remained an important trade hub. Agricultural produce going north to Richmond had to be unloaded from the cars of other railroads in Petersburg and transferred to those of the R&P. It is important to note that not all of this produce was sent on to Richmond; Petersburg had a flourishing tobacco processing industry on the eve of the Civil War.

The city of Petersburg, with the R&P depot at center and the Appomattox River at right. From the December 13, 1862 issue of Harper’s Weekly.

173 Ibid. 10.
While the R&P was the most profitable railroad in antebellum Virginia, it was not the only successful line. An analysis of the 1857 through 1860 reports of Virginia’s railroads to the Board of Public Works reveals that multiple lines showed financial promise. The Richmond & Danville, for example, completed in 1858, brought in $491,674 that year, which grew to $560,904 in 1860. Most of these lines, like the Richmond & Danville, were constructed during the “railroad mania” of the late 1840s and 1850s and were still heavily in debt. The R&P, it should be remembered, took twenty years and heavy state support before it issued its first dividends.

The Virginia Central Railroad, a focus of John Majewski’s *A House Dividing*, was a much different railroad than the R&P. Chartered in 1836 as the Louisa Railroad, the line extended northwest from Richmond to connect with the Ohio River. Throughout its history, the line competed for state funding with James River Canal, which also hoped to reach the Ohio. On the eve of the Civil War, both projects, stymied by east-west sectional rivalries within Virginia, remained unfinished. Nonetheless, Majewski writes that the railroad “helped create a mini-boom when it reached Charlottesville in 1850,” raising land values and facilitating farmers’ access to distant markets. While it failed to reach the Ohio River, the Virginia Central nevertheless brought real benefits to the community that had funded it.

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174 Annual Reports of the Rail Road Companies of the State of Virginia, 1858, 1860.  
175 Majewski, 65.
Conclusion

“MODERNITY IN SERVICE OF ITS OWN DEMANDS”

From 1861 through 1865, Civil War ripped the United States in half. During the conflict, Virginia’s railroads proved wholly inadequate in transporting troops and supplies to aid the Confederate War effort. Materiel and personnel traveling long distances was slowed considerably by the continuous breaks in the railroad network. “By the end of 1861,” writes Scott Reynolds Nelson, “the importance of an efficient, centrally controlled railway network was recognized in the corridors of power in both Union and Confederate armies.”\(^{176}\) Although fragmentation caused Virginia’s rail network to fail during the Civil War, the lack of physical connections between lines was central to both the design and success of Virginia’s railroad network before it.

The intentional breaks in the rail lines had encouraged the growth of towns and cities. This growth stemmed largely from the increasing amounts of agricultural produce carried by rail. By facilitating the shipment of the products of slave labor to market, railroads ensured that slavery remained profitable, entrenching the system in Virginia society. Slaves were also integral to the operation of Virginia’s antebellum railroads. In 1857, the R&P employed 65 slaves working as omnibus drivers, mechanics, firemen, who stoked the fires of the locomotives to build steam, station hands, section hands, who repaired the track, and in the company office.\(^{177}\) Some of the bonded laborers who worked for the railroad were hired from their

\(^{176}\) Nelson, 33.
\(^{177}\) 1857 R&P Annual Report.
masters and paid wages. The R&P also owned slaves; the company listed "the purchase of a negro man" for $1,070 under its extraordinary expenses for 1856. In addition to working on the railroad, slaves also traveled on the trains. Riding on the RF&P, Frederick Law Olmsted described servants accompanying their masters on board. While riding the R&P, he observed a very different kind of slave travel. The train consisted of “two first-class passenger cars, and two freight cars. The latter were occupied by about forty negroes, most of them belonging to traders, who were sending them to the cotton states to be sold.”

Historian Aaron W. Marrs writes that "the ease with which slavery was integrated into railroading shows that the Old South" was “a society that pursued modernity in service of its own demands.”

There is no denying that, as a whole, Virginia’s railroads on the eve of the Civil War, compared with those of the North, were less extensive, less integrated and less profitable. Nonetheless, for a society that wished to grow its cities while preserving slavery, they were a success.

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178 1847 R&P Annual Report.
179 1856 R&P Annual Report.
180 Olmsted, 39.
181 Olmsted, 57.
182 Marrs, 198.
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