



Nashville to Chattanooga route

On Dec. 13, 1850, the steamboat Beauty hauled something from Cincinnati to Nashville that most Tennesseans had never seen before.

It was called a locomotive.



A railroad joining Nashville and Chattanooga gave Tennessee farmers access to the Atlantic Coast via another line from Chattanooga to Savannah, Ga.

At the time, Nashville was not connected to another city via rail. Virtually everything that was produced in Nashville left on the Cumberland River to be traded in New Orleans. But a few years earlier, State Sen. John Overton and A.O.P. Nicholson, the editor of the Nashville Union newspaper, had begun organizing support for a new rail line to Chattanooga.

The idea of the railroad was to hook up with another rail line then under construction that led from Chattanooga to Savannah, Ga. The line would give Middle Tennessee's farmers access to Atlantic Coast markets, plus give Nashville's companies access to untapped coal reserves in southeastern Tennessee. "The produce of Middle Tennessee, instead of passing over 2,460 miles of dangerous navigation with heavy insurance and many transshipments, would reach Charleston or Savannah in 28 hours ... at one-fifth the cost and in one-tenth the time," Overton argued.

In 1845, Overton and Nicholson convinced the Tennessee General Assembly to grant their railroad a charter and give it

power of eminent domain. They hired Nashville businessman Vernon Stevenson to raise money for the project. Stevenson reportedly went door to door in Nashville selling stock in the new venture. But in the end it was the citizens of Charleston, S.C. (the South's wealthiest city at that time) who ensured the project's success by investing \$500,000 in it.

Surveying crews began laying out the rail line in 1847. Since a straight line between Nashville and Chattanooga crossed the Cumberland Plateau at a steep place, they chose a circuitous route — through Rutherford, Bedford, Coffee and Franklin counties and into northeast Alabama. At a new town named for Stevenson, the rail line then turned northeast toward Chattanooga.

The construction project was monumental. The most difficult part of it was a 2,200-foot tunnel near a new town in Franklin County called Cowan. "Work was carried on in three shifts," author Wilbur Creighton wrote in "Building of Nashville." "The drilling was done by hand since the steam drill had not been per-



It left its mark on Tennessee

fectured at the time. One man would hold and turn a short length of steel bit while two others struck it with eight-pound hammers.” Most of the manual laborers were either African-American slaves or immigrant workers.

Today the old train station in Cowan has been converted into a small railroad museum — one of the most underappreciated historic attractions in Tennessee. I’ve created a virtual tour of the place on the “Tennessee History for Kids” Web site. The domain name of the virtual tour is www.tnhistoryforkids.org/places/cowan_rr_museum.

The town of Cowan isn’t the only legacy of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad. In the 1850s, the Episcopal Church was looking for a place to build a new educational institution and theological school. Railroad officials brought some bishops to the Cumberland Plateau to see that beautiful part of Tennessee, and they were so impressed that they decided to put their institution there. Today it is known as the University of the South.

Back to Nashville: By the time the Beauty brought its enormous cargo upstream in December 1850, Nashville and its newspapers were excited at the prospect of rail travel. Along with the locomotive, the steamboat brought 13 freight cars and one fancy passenger car, which impressed a reporter from Nashville’s afternoon newspaper. “The passenger car is a very beautiful piece of workmanship, the

seats of mahogany with figured plush cushions,” the Republican Banner reported in a tiny story headlined “The Iron Horse Arrived At Last.”

Mules later dragged the locomotive, freight cars and passenger cars to the new Nashville and Chattanooga terminal. In the spring of 1851, the train made its first trip, an 11-mile jaunt to Antioch. It was a glorious and exciting day for Tennessee’s state capital; only the important and the well-connected got to ride on that first train for Antioch. One leg after another would be opened during the next few years until Nashville was finally connected to Chattanooga in 1854.



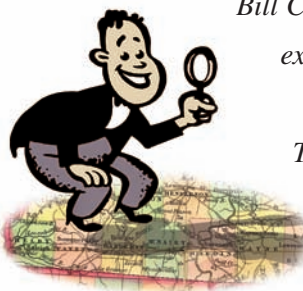
The Cowan Railroad Museum, above and below, housed in an old train depot, displays models, antiques, vintage photos and other railway artifacts.

The opening of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad connected Middle Tennessee with the Atlantic Coast but did nothing to connect Nashville to northern cities such as Chicago. That would come in December 1859, when the trunk line of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad was completed.

Not long after that, the Civil War broke out between the North and the South. If there were any doubters left about the power of the railroads, they were silenced during the course of that war. The Union Army used the Louisville & Nashville Railroad to support its army in Nashville and followed the Nashville and Chattanooga line during its invasion of the South. After the war, the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad added new lines and became known as the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway. 🔄



Tennessee History for Kids



Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of “Tennessee History for Kids,” an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org.