

Railroads of Washington County, Tennessee

Railroads first appeared in America **in the 1830's**. Prior to the coming of the railroads, the communities that grew and prospered were seaports or those located on inland waterways. Land transportation, consisting of animal powered vehicles, was neither economical nor dependable. The railroad could provide the transportation needed to develop the interior of our new nation; under the free enterprise system their growth and development was rapid.

In the early 1830's there was considerable interest among the citizens of East Tennessee, including Washington County, in the possibility of building a railroad in their area. In 1831, a number of public meetings were held in various towns in East Tennessee and Virginia to advocate the construction of a railroad from Virginia into Knoxville; one of these meetings was held in Jonesborough. An agreement by Tennessee and Virginia concerning issuance of stock in this railroad could not be reached, and the project was eventually abandoned.

By 1835, there was another movement, this time to build a railroad from Cincinnati, Ohio to Charleston, South Carolina. Once again, the people of East Tennessee were very interested in the possibility of having this rail system pass through their part of the state. Several meetings were held throughout East Tennessee during the winter of 1835-36 in favor of the project. At one of these meetings, held in Jonesborough in October 1835, a memorial to the Tennessee General Assembly was adopted. Signed by 600 citizens of Washington County, this petition was entitled, "The Memorial of Six Hundred Citizens of Washington County praying for the **General Assembly to Pass a Law** and if necessary to pledge the faith of the state to raise the funds necessary to Construct a Rail Road from the North Carolina line to the Virginia and Kentucky line to unite with the Ohio and South Carolina Railroad." **Despite this early plea by Washington County residents for a railroad, it would be quite a number of years before their dream would be realized.**

By 1845, there were 4,600 miles of railroads in the United States operating in every state east of the Mississippi – **except Tennessee!** The first railroad to operate in Tennessee was the Western and Atlantic, built by the state of Georgia from Atlanta to Chattanooga. Several railroad projects in Tennessee had resulted in failure and interest was lost. Several communities were more interested in improving the state's waterways than building railroads. Other states with railroads began to prosper. Farms and factories could get their products to market, and people had a dependable means by which they could travel. In 1845, a convention was held in Memphis to consider ways and means to improve

the state's commerce; the conclusion was a system of railroads. Interest was renewed with the state now offering aid. Old projects were revived and new projects begun. Middle and West Tennessee took the lead with the Memphis and Charleston Railroad and the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad, both completed in the early 1850's.

The first railroad to enter Washington County was the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad, chartered in 1849 to be built from Knoxville to the Virginia state line at Bristol. This road would form a connecting link between the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad, entering Knoxville from Chattanooga, and the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, being built from Lynchburg to Bristol. Construction did not get underway until 1855, with one construction crew beginning at Bristol and another building out of Knoxville.

The moving force behind the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad was **Dr. Samuel B. Cunningham**, a renowned surgeon and community leader in Jonesborough. The railroad was experiencing financial problems, as did so many in that era. Dr. Cunningham and a dedicated group of residents of Washington County pooled their resources, pledging their personal fortunes as collateral and subscribed to \$500,000 in the railroad stock. The State of Tennessee then joined in with a loan of \$8,000 per mile of line and \$300,000 for bridges. Andrew Johnson, who was Governor of Tennessee at the time and later became President of the United States, was a stock holder and supporter of the railroad. In 1857, the construction crew from Bristol entered Washington County. An enterprising resident of Washington County, Henry Johnson, realizing the coming of the railroad would bring business opportunities, bought a tract of land alongside Brush Creek adjacent to the stage road, erected a store building, and waited for the railroad to come to him. **The railroad erected a water tank at the site and named the place "Johnson's Tank" which was the origin of the City of Johnson City.**

In 1858, the two construction crews met at a point two miles west of Mosheim in Greene County for the driving of the last spike. As the location was midway between Knoxville and Bristol, it was named "Midway." The name still holds today. Total construction cost was reported to be \$2.5 million. **Dr. Cunningham served as railroad president until the line was completed, resigning in 1859.**

During the Civil War the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad found itself in an unusual position. With its end to end connections, it was a vital link in the direct rail route from Atlanta, the arsenal of the Confederacy, to Richmond, the Confederate capital. The rail traffic was heavy, transporting war material and troops to the Tennessee and Virginia war zones. In early 1861, the Confederate capital was moved by

rail from Montgomery to Richmond. There was a procession of trains bearing officials, clerks, records and furnishings. These trains traveled over the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroads through Washington County. Although Tennessee seceded and joined the Confederacy, the people of Upper East Tennessee, for the most part, were strong Union sympathizers. The East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad was then in a precarious position – the main rail route of the Confederacy operating through a Union loyalist stronghold. The union loyalists began sabotaging the rail line to disrupt the war efforts of the Confederacy. **Troops were sent in to quell the situation, establishing a camp between the railroad and Lamont Street in Johnson City.** In December, 1862, a force of Union loyalists from Carter County burned the railroad bridge over the Watauga River and the Carter's (present Town of Watauga) Depot. The heavy war traffic and the ravages of war left the railroad in a sad state of repair.

In 1869, the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad merged with the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad to form the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia (ETV&G) Railroad, operating from Chattanooga to Bristol. The depression of 1893 put the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia Railroad in receivership and in **1894 it was absorbed by the newly created and rapidly expanding Southern Railway System**, becoming a part of the latter's Knoxville Division. In 1982, the Southern Railway System and the Norfolk and Western Railway merged to create the Norfolk Southern.

The second railway in Washington County was the **East Tennessee and Western North Carolina (ET&WNC) Railroad, chartered in 1866** by a local group to build a railroad from "either Carter's (Watauga) or Johnson's Depot on the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad" to Elizabethton, Doe River Cove and to the Cranberry Iron Works over the North Carolina state line. A large deposit of magnetite iron ore, thought to be the richest deposit in America at that time, had been discovered years earlier in the Cranberry area. Several smelters were built to process the ore, with both the ore and the processed iron being **hailed by wagons to Johnson's Depot in Tennessee and Marion and Lenoir in North Carolina.** A transportation system – a railroad – was needed to get the ore and iron products out of the mountains.

Stock was offered to residents and towns along the route. The State of Tennessee authorized bonds in the amount of \$400,000 for the construction. Survey work was completed in 1867 with Johnson's Depot considered the best terminal point and the elevation of the ridge between Carter's Depot and the Watauga River was too great to be overcome in that distance. Construction began in the spring of 1868. The roadbed

was partially completed to Hampton by the summer of 1869, with track and bridge work getting underway in early 1870.

The ET&WNC was also experiencing money problems. In 1871, the State declared the railroad delinquent and its franchise was sold. The new owners made no attempt to resume work. **In 1875, Ario Pardee and Associates purchased the defunct railroad for \$25,000.** Two years before, Pardee had purchased the Cranberry Iron Works and now the iron works and now with the iron works and the railroad under the same ownership he had the means to get the ore to the outside world.

It was then that a decision was made that would result in the ET&WNC becoming one of the most unique railroads in the eastern United States. The original builders had adopted a 5 foot gauge. Most railroads at that time were building to what later became the American standard gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches. Pardee was familiar with the successful 3 foot gauge railroads in the Colorado Mountains. He determined that a 3 foot gauge railroad would be practical and certainly more economical to build and operate in the rugged mountainous area it would penetrate. **Thus, the ET&WNC became a “narrow gauge” railroad.**

Location work from Hampton to Cranberry began in 1879. Construction followed in 1880 and progressed without interruption until completed into Cranberry. **In 1881, a narrow gauge locomotive arrived in Johnson City via the ETV&G Railroad and was put to work hauling materials for the advancing track work.** The 14 mile segment from Johnson City to Hampton was opened for service in August 1881. The first train carried several flat cars with an enthusiastic, overflowing crowd. A second locomotive arrived at this time. Beyond Hampton the construction continued up the rugged Doe River Gorge and was completed into Cranberry with the line being officially opened on July 3, 1882. Daily freight and passenger service began the following day.

At first the ET&WNC used the ETV&G depot in Johnson City until its own depot was built at the intersection of Buffalo Street and Wilson Avenue in the early 1890s. The structure still stands (*Free Service Tire Store*). Yard tracks, shops and a water tank were built in Johnson City and in 1896 the General Office was moved there from Elizabethton. **Although the ET&WNC operated only 1.25 miles in Washington County, the economic benefits were considerable.** The bulk of the freight traffic was the iron ore from the Cranberry mines which was processed at the Cranberry furnace, located along Fairview Avenue at Steel Street. Numerous saw mills and logging operations sprung up in the virgin forests in the area served by the railroad. Now that

transportation was available the superb unspoiled scenery attracted tourists.

A big disadvantage of the ET&WNC operation was that all freight moving off or onto the line at Johnson City had to be transferred from or into narrow gauge cars. To reduce a major part of this costly and time consuming operation, the railroad installed a third rail in the track from Johnson City to Elizabethton in 1906 to accommodate standard gauge rail equipment. In 1911, the third rail was extended to Hampton to serve the Ritter Lumber Company operation there. The standard gauge cars were pulled with the narrow gauge locomotives using a novel conversion coupler. The ET&WNC acquired the first standard gauge locomotive in 1927, and all locomotives purchased after that were standard gauge.

Traffic grew and remained at a high level. **During World War I, the Cranberry Mines were producing 60,000 tons of ore annually.** Johnson City became the supply hub for the area served by the railroad. In the 1920s traffic began to dwindle as the lumber was depleted and the mines worked out. In 1929, the mines and the furnace at Johnson City were shut down. The paved highway from Johnson City to Boone was completed in 1931. The Great Depression contributed to the rail traffic decline. Passenger service was relegated to a “mixed” train. The ET&WNC managed to ride out the Depression with a limited traffic of coal, cordwood, merchandise, asphalt and paving stone for highway construction. There was a further decline in rail traffic when the flood of August 1940 destroyed much of the line from Cranberry to Boone, resulting in the abandonment of that segment of the line.

World War II brought a temporary boost to the ET&WNC, but with the end of hostilities, traffic continued to decline. In 1948, the narrow gauge facilities (shop and yard) were moved to Elizabethton and the inner (narrow gauge) rail was removed from Johnson City to Elizabethton. In October 1950, the remaining narrow gauge part of the railroad from Elizabethton was abandoned. After abandonment of the narrow gauge part, the ET&WNC operation was limited to a switching movement between Johnson City and Elizabethton. In July 1983, the ET&WNC was sold to a Wisconsin group who operated it with the new name “East Tennessee Railway.”

The physical character, the operations and area served by the ET&WNC made it most unique among railroads. **The high pitched “tweet” sound of its whistles gave it the name “Tweetsie.”** There are many stories illustrating that the employees offered a personal service as well as a transportation service. Housewives could give their shopping lists to the crews on the “down” train, whereupon they would buy the groceries or

goods during the layover in Johnson City and deliver them on the “up” train that afternoon. If the kids wanted to visit Grandma, they were put on the train and the crew would stop at Grandma’s house and deliver the kids.

Another unique feature was that the ET&WNC used steam locomotives until 1967! These immaculately maintained engines attracted rail photographers and fans from all over the country. The Southern Railway, wanting steam locomotives for excursions, traded diesel locomotives to the ET&WNC for the steamers.

The ET&WNC opened a totally isolated area, provided a vital service and won the hearts of its people only to be replaced by advancing technology. Tweetsie is gone, but it will linger in the memory of those who experienced it and beyond that in the folklore of the area.

The next railroad to enter Washington County brought the promise of great things – but ended in a bust. A Union Army General, John T. Wilder, while campaigning through the south during the Civil War saw the great potential for development but knew the area was badly in need of a transportation system. After the war he pursued his ideas and was successful in getting financial backing. On September 30, 1886, he received a charter for the Charleston, Cincinnati, and Chicago Railroad. It came to be known as the “3-C” Railroad. This was an ambitious project that proposed building a 625 mile railroad from Ironton, Ohio, a busy river port, to Charleston, South Carolina, a busy seaport, with an extension down the Ohio River to Cincinnati. The 3-C Railroad would serve the coalfields of eastern Kentucky and Southwest Virginia; the mineral and timber areas of East Tennessee and Western North Carolina; the resort areas of the Blue Ridge and the rich agricultural lands of the Carolinas. Construction got underway immediately with the total cost of \$21 million. On the southern end of the line, the 171 mile segment from Camden, South Carolina to Marion, North Carolina, the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, was completed in 1890.

The northern headquarters for the 3-C were established in Johnson City and construction was begun both north and south. The track reached Erwin in 1890 where construction stopped at the Nolichucky River. North of Johnson City the grade was 90% completed to St. Paul, Virginia by 1893 and track laying had reached the DeVault Ford on the Watauga River.

At this point in time, Johnson City was becoming a “boom town.” Newspapers in both Nashville and Knoxville carried accounts of the solid growth. Johnson City was selected for the 3-C system headquarters. The General Office building was erected at Fairview

Avenue and Center Street, later becoming part of the Empire Furniture Company plant. Land was acquired west of Broadway for yards and shops. A union station was under construction west of Broadway to serve all three railroads, the 3-C, ETV&G and the ET&WNC.

The business and commercial growth in those days centered around the railroad station. The first corporate limit of Johnson City was a half-mile radius centered from the original ET&V station near Fountain Square. Anticipating the growth around the new union station, John T. Wilder organized the Carnegie Land Company to develop the area. Several hundred acres east of Broadway were purchased and subdivided into streets and lots. Demand for the property was heavy. **The Carnegie Hotel was erected along Fairview opposite the Union Station site.**

Then came the bust – the depression of 1893. The English banking firm, the Baring Brothers, a principal backer of the 3-C Railroad, failed; the failure of the 3-C followed. The 3-C's failure resulted in a heavy loss in the area by individuals, municipalities and investment firms. Johnson City, having subscribed to \$70,000 in 3-C bonds, was left in a financial bind. John T. Wilder estimated his personal loss at \$750,000. The Baring Brothers' loss was reported to be \$7 million.

On July 17, 1893, the assets of the 3-C Railroad were sold at foreclosure for \$550,000. The new owners operated the line under the name of the Ohio River and Charleston Railroad but made little effort to follow the 3-C overall plan. Construction progressed slowly up the Nolichucky Gorge and the Toe River Valley into North Carolina. Construction costs were heavy and revenue were light. Beginning in 1897, the railroad was sold off in pieces to connecting lines. **In 1902, the section which extended from St. Paul, Virginia through Johnson City into North Carolina was sold to George L. Carter.** Carter had acquired vast coal lands in Southwestern Virginia and needed a railroad to move his coal line into the southeast and Atlantic Coast. He first reorganized the railroad as the South and Western and in 1908 as the Carolina, Clinchfield and Ohio. Backed by a syndicate with adequate financing and superb engineering expertise, Carter set out to complete the railroad.

As the bulk of the traffic would be heavy with coal trains, the engineering staff determined that the 3-C location, with its numerous stiff curves and undulating grades, would be a deterrent to an efficient and economical operation. **Carter then abandoned the 3-C location and its extensive completed roadbed from south of St. Paul, Virginia to Johnson City and built the entire road on an entirely different location using construction standards unheard of at that time.** Where the 3-C had only one tunnel in the entire distance, the new location had 15, two of

them in Washington County. One was near Gray with a length of 472 feet and the other was through Indian Ridge with a length of 1073 feet. The Boones Creek Bridge, 80 feet high and 840 feet long, is another example of the superb construction. The Knob Creek fill is over one mile long and required 400,000 cubic yards of earth and rock. At Johnson City the railroad was connected into the 3-C line at the King Springs Road overpass. Many miles of the 3-C unused railroad bed are still visible today. **Fairview Avenue in Johnson City from Smith Street to Watauga Road is built on the old 3-C roadbed.** Remains of the roadbed are still visible through Cash Hollow and the Arney farm property along the Watauga River.

The original headquarters for Carter's railroad venture were in Bristol. **In 1907, he moved the offices into the Carnegie office building in Johnson City.** The plans included specifications for building the main classification yard and shops in the area east of Broadway. Unable to acquire the necessary land, he located the yard, shops and operating equipment in Erwin. The offices were moved into the Love-Thomas Building on Ashe Street in Johnson City in 1912 (present Sophisticated Otter Restaurant) and in 1926 they were consolidated with the other facilities in Erwin.

The Clinchfield began service from Johnson City to Marion, North Carolina in September 1908 and completed the line into Spartanburg, South Carolina in October 1909. With the completion of the Clinchfield, Washington County was served by three railroads radiating out of Johnson City in six different directions. **Johnson City became the rail hub of Upper East Tennessee.**

The excellent rail service brought many industries into the area. All three railroads operated a yard service in Johnson City distributing and collecting cars from the various industries and interchanging with each other. The Clinchfield operated a busy transfer service in Johnson City for less than carload freight and express. During the heyday of passenger train service, 18 trains per day arrived, departed or operated through Johnson City. Jonesborough was served by eight trains each day. **The plans had a union station west of Broadway to serve all three railroads collapsed with the demise of the 3-C. In the early 1900s, each railroad built its separate station in the vicinity of Fountain Square and the business hub of Johnson City grew around them.**

As the improved highways became more numerous and Tri-Cities Airport expanded its service area, passenger train service diminished. The ET&WNC, which offered only a local service to a limited area, ceased passenger service in 1940. The last passenger service on the Clinchfield

through Washington County was in April 1954, and the last on the Southern was on August 12, 1970. The Clinchfield and ET&WNC depots still remain but are not used by the railroads. The Southern depot in Johnson City was razed in 1972 to make room for the “Downtown Loop” a local street, and the Jonesborough depot was razed in the early 1980s. The Clinchfield Railroad depot in Johnson City on Buffalo Street remained in use as a railway yard office until 1985.

In the early 1800s, iron ore deposits were discovered in the southern portion of Washington County. Efforts to process the ore began as early as **1834, when Elijah Embree** and others built a furnace on Clark’s Creek to produce pig iron. Some of the iron was used locally, but the large portion was hauled by flat boats down the Nolichucky River to Chattanooga. Further efforts to process the ore met with little success. In 1870, the Embreeville Company built a furnace in the Bumpass Cove area to be served by a railroad to be built by the ETV&G Railroad. The 13-mile line connected with the main line in the west end of Johnson City near Mountain Home and came to be known locally as the Embreeville branch. It was completed in 1891. A “Y” for turning trains was installed at this junction, giving the name “Y Section” to the area. The Embreeville branch was included in the merger of the ETV&G Railroad with the Southern Railway in 1894. With rail service available, the mining operations flourished. Saw mills were set up to get out the virgin timber. Later deposits of lead, zinc, and manganese were discovered in the same area. In its heyday, Embreeville was a thriving, bustling community with the mining operations, lumbering, offices, shops, over 100 employee houses, stores, a school and club house.

In 1905, the Southern Railway, concerned over the South and Western (Clinchfield) building south of Johnson City into North Carolina and to the Atlantic seaboard, began constructing a grade the Embreeville branch, up the Nolichucky River through Erwin and paralleling the South and Western into North Carolina. Whether this was an effort to compete with the South and Western or merely discourage it is not known. After grading some 20 miles of roadbed the project was abandoned. Several mile of the abandoned roadbed are still visible from Embreeville to Erwin along State Highway 81.

Passenger service to the branch was minimal and never developed beyond a tri-weekly round trip leaving Johnson City in late morning and returning in mid afternoon. The most notable feature of the branch was the bridge over the Nolichucky River. It consisted of a steel truss span over the river channel with timber trestle approach spans having a total length of 1,350 feet.

Here again comes the all too familiar story – the invasion of improved highways, with trucks siphoning off the traffic. The railroad applied for abandonment in 1935 and was denied. Traffic continued to decline and in 1939 the railroad again applied for abandonment; this time it was approved effective in April 1939. Dismantling the track and bridges followed. Many miles of the abandoned roadbed are still visible along Antioch Road and in the Lamar Community. The Cherry Grove Baptist Church is sited on the old railroad bed.

There was yet another major railroad construction project in Washington County. When the Clinchfield built into Johnson City in 1908, it connected into the former 3-C line, using the latter line into Erwin. **The old 3-C line from Johnson City to Unicoi had numerous sharp curves, undulating heavy grades and 11 street crossings in Johnson City.** As rail traffic became heavier with longer trains these crossings were not only hazardous but created enormous traffic congestion. The original plan for the Clinchfield was to bypass Johnson City to the west with a location along the slope of Buffalo Mountain. This revised location, known as the “Clinchfield high line” would reduce the distance from Johnson City to Unicoi by 2.4 miles, reduce the numerous curves, eliminate a pusher grade, and remove all through trains from downtown Johnson City. By the mid-1960s feasibility studies determined that the high line construction could be justified. Construction began in the fall of 1969 and was opened for traffic in October 1970. The total cost was \$2.6 million. George L. Carter’s visionary Clinchfield Railroad is now a major part of the CSX Railway.

The railroads played a huge role in the development of Washington County and its economy. Railroads brought in many industries and continue to be a significant asset to the area. Johnson City owes its origin to the coming of the railroad and efforts are underway to restore the downtown historic district to the City’s railroad glory days.