Railroads: Part 2 - First Rail Lines and the Birth of the North Carolina Railroad **[1]**

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Railroads

by Douglas A. Wait and John R. deTreville, 2006

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First Rail Lines and the Birth of the North Carolina Railroad

The Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, which changed its route and its name to the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad [6] when the citizens of Raleigh failed to show sufficient interest, was founded in 1833. To encourage construction, the state government purchased 40 percent of the railroad's stock. The 161-mile route, at that time the longest railroad line in the world, was completed in 1840. The state also bought two-thirds of the Atlantic & North Carolina Railroad, running between Goldsboro and Morehead City, as well as one-half of the Western North Carolina Railroad [7].

In 1849 the General Assembly [8] chartered the North Carolina Railroad [9], which was to be constructed from Charlotte to Goldsboro via Salisbury and Raleigh. The chosen route was a compromise between eastern and western economic interests. Easterners wanted an east-west route to connect ports with western markets via the conjunction of the North Carolina Railroad terminus and the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad at Goldsboro. Westerners wanted to expand their existing north-south trade with Virginia via the Danville & Richmond Railroad and with South Carolina, utilizing the Charlotte & South Carolina Railroad. Of the estimated $3 million needed to build the North Carolina Railroad, the state provided 75 percent in the form of purchased stock. Construction of the 223-mile route began in 1851 and was completed in 1856. Slaves owned by shareholding landowners along the route, who were paid half in cash and half in railroad stock, did much of the work. The iron rails were imported from Wales. The first steam locomotives were the sturdy engines built by William Norris of Philadelphia.

Eastbound freight prior to the Civil War consisted primarily of agricultural and forest commodities, including wheat, flour, dried fruit, lumber, and naval stores [10] (turpentine, tar, and pitch). Westbound freight included guano fertilizer, bacon, tobacco [11], and manufactured goods from the more industrialized northeastern states. The most dramatic effect of railroad construction was the connection of the Piedmont to the ports of eastern North Carolina and the industrial Northeast, as well as to other cities and markets in the South. The resulting cash-crop agriculture and industrialization shifted economic dominance in North Carolina from trade and agricultural interests in the east to those in the central part of the state. Cities like Burlington, Durham, Goldsboro, High Point, Mebane, Selma, and Thomasville owed their existence to the railroad, which also significantly enhanced the economic fortunes of municipalities such as Charlotte, Greensboro, and Salisbury.

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