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Bittersweet: The Louisville and Nashville Railroad and Warren County

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To this day its trail bisects Bowling Green and Warren County. People, hampered by its crossing, stop their cars and jeer or settle down to count its component parts as it passes at what appears to be a snail's pace. It emits a sonorous wail that penetrates the most insulated houses for miles, and its rumble and consistent clacking beat out a pure, hypnotic rhythm. Despite the best efforts of winged transports and eighteen-wheeled chariots, the train has not been defeated. Behemoth engines still pull freight cars through Bowling Green and Warren County on a regular basis. The railroad's rich history, particularly that related to passenger service, eludes most people born after 1960. To others its image is fading, but to those who lived intimately with the pervasive railroad its memories are as lucid as the next whistle and as vibrant as the rail crossing's flashing rubies.

Warren County's lengthy rail heritage dates from the chartering of a small tramway from the boat landing to central Bowling Green in 1836, to the construction of a magnificent rail station in 1925, to the cessation of passenger service in 1979. When private and federal monies enabled the Bowling Green depot's restoration in the mid-1990s, many citizens professed a renewed interest in Warren County's railroad history. This enthusiasm heightened with the production of "Beauty of the Southland" in 1995, a thirty-minute documentary about the county's rail heritage. The Landmark Association publishes this history in hopes that the interest in Bowling Green's Louisville and Nashville (L&N) depot will generate further enthusiasm for our county's history and for other area historic preservation projects. *Bittersweet* briefly discusses rail development in the United States and then

explores the love-hate relationship that Bowling Green experienced with the L&N. Of particular significance was the city's twenty-four year battle for construction of the 1925 depot. It is a story of intrigue, chicanery, boosterism, and triumph; it is a great story!

PORTAGE RAILWAY

The tramway, precursor of the conventional railroad, existed in the United States as early as the late-eighteenth century. Horses pulled tram cars on tracks consisting of iron straps fastened to wooden boards without the support of cross-ties. The Delaware and Hudson Canal Company of Honesdale, Pennsylvania, introduced the steam locomotive in the United States in 1829. The company built a nine-mile stretch of track to connect its mines with the canal and then purchased an English-built steam locomotive known as the Stourbridge Lion. The experiment succeeded, making its quick jaunt on 8 August 1829 "the first running of a true railway locomotive in the United States."¹ Unfortunately the little engine was too heavy for its roadbed and was eventually sold for scrap. In 1933 the Delaware and Hudson had the machine replicated for the Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition.

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad is often referred to as the Mother of Railroads. Its first tracks, located near downtown Baltimore, consisted of primitive strap rails. On 28 August 1830 a diminutive steam engine dubbed the Tom Thumb (it contained a one-horsepower engine) hauled thirty-six people on these strap rails at the amazing speed of eighteen miles an hour. Competing stagecoach operators challenged Tom Thumb's inventor Peter Cooper to a race.

Although the train eventually overtook the horse-drawn carriage, mechanical problems precipitated the locomotive's defeat. Of course the Baltimore and Ohio eventually employed steam locomotives and reached Ohio twenty-four years later.

From these rather inauspicious beginnings, the railroad blossomed into the transport of choice by the mid-1850s. In the 1830s most railroads were short lines connecting two population centers or were used to transport raw materials to manufacturing or processing centers. Still, the potential of railroads led a contemporary to note that the steam trains "will yet be acknowledged as having given the mightiest propulsion to the general improvement of mankind."² As the railroad evolved, his prediction proved correct. By 1840 America's short lines equaled 3,328 miles of track. During the next decade the miles of track more than doubled to 8,879. This growth quickly accelerated during the 1850s; by 1860 the total miles of rail increased to 30,626. The railroads employed an improved T-rail which was joined with an "iron tongue" or fishplate, and was attached to crossties with "hook-headed" spikes. This method of rail construction has changed little to this day, although many railroads now employ concrete crossties.

People initially used railroads chiefly for passenger transport, but proponents soon preached the benefits of transporting freight by rail rather than by steamboat, canal barge, or on rough roads. Trains were capable of carrying greater quantities of freight than steamboats, were faster, avoided the charges incurred at river locks or canals, and were considerably less dependent on weather conditions.³

Warren County's rail saga commences with a

tramway constructed to transport freight and passengers from Bowling Green's developing boat landing to the community's center, a distance of approximately 1.5 miles. The steam engine reached Bowling Green first in the form of a steamboat, the *United States* in 1828. Completion of a series of locks and dams on the Green and Barren Rivers in 1838 made year round navigation possible. Besides transporting passengers to and from Bowling Green, steamboats left the city burgeoned with the fruits of a rich agricultural region and returned with fancy goods and other finished products. James Rumsey Skiles, who was chiefly responsible for obtaining funds to open the Green and Barren Rivers to navigation, James G. Pitts, and Jacob Van Meter received a charter on 11 February 1836 "to construct one or more tracks together with wharves or landings, depots and warehouses as deemed necessary" to connect the boat landing with the city's hub. Quick action was necessary, because the charter required that construction begin within two years or it would be voided.⁴ Apparently Skiles had little difficulty selling the \$20,000 in stocks for the company. Euclid M. Covington granted Skiles the land necessary to build the railway, but he stipulated that a board of trustees should always administer the company.

Using slave labor, the Bowling Green Portage Railway was completed sometime in 1837 and reputedly was the second railway built in Kentucky. The line was constructed of vertical cedar rails with steel straps attached; the builders used no crossties. The city allowed James Pitts to lay tracks "as he may think expedient", with the caveat that the road must not impede traffic. Apparently the track had to be re-laid, as city

The Song of the Railroad

Charles P. Atmore, 1900

I'm a Railroad! They call me "The L. and N."
"Miss Ellen N." I'm called by railroad men,
And they seem to love that name.
I wonder what these good friends will think
When they see I have taken to printer's ink
To tell of my well-earned fame.

I was built a good many years ago,
When workmen were honest, construction was slow,
And they gave me the greatest care.
My track was of iron, my bridges of wood-
I know they'd have built me of steel if they could
But steel in those days was rare.

But the days of my iron rail soon passed,
And "after the war" I grew quite fast
To a stone and steel-laid track;
My bridges to iron and steel combined,
My ties the best that my friends could find,
And now there is nothing I lack.

I've been in this first-class condition so long,
Added so many miles, grew so very strong,
I think I can now "speak out."
For with truth, I can say, the whole of my line
Is A number one, and I combine
Every charm of a passenger route.

My passenger engines are monsters of power;
They'll easily make fifty miles in an hour
With either my "mail" or "Express."
My freighters are "Moguls," they weigh ninety tons,
But my heavy steel rail will bear greater ones
And never feel any distress.

"Twixt the North and the South, I venture to say,
I am the "boss line;" I'm "the quickest," best way;
This I want all the people to know;
I'm the best-managed road, and more polite men
Are found on the trains of the "Great L. and N."
Than anywhere else you go.

In passage equipment I take greatest pride;
I want all the people to have a nice ride.
Who "D.H." or pay me their fare.
I've adopted the latest, the most approved plan
To make "rapid transit" as safe as I can;
My men use the greatest of care.

minutes recorded that the "grade of road the company is constructing is not in conformity" with the trustees' earlier specifications.⁵ In 1921, when Tenth Street was excavated prior to paving, a number of these cedar rails were discovered. The rails were well preserved and were split up and divided among local souvenir hunters. Interestingly, none of these antiquities seem to have survived.

On the Portage Railway, horses pulled goods and passengers in wooden cars described as "platforms on wheels." The line originated at a landing consisting of three acres on the Barren River west of Bowling Green. Skiles owned the adjoining three-acre plot, where he operated a steam mill. The road's 60 feet wide right of way paralleled Church Street to the intersection of Main and Adams Streets, where it then ran south between Adam and Kentucky Streets to Tenth Street. The road then traveled east along Tenth Street to another three-acre site, the present location of the Warren County courthouse, where a depot was constructed. The depot was reputed to be little more than a shed and was jocularly referred to as "the fruit stand", referring no doubt to the produce that the train hauled to and from the boat landing.⁶

During the late-1830s and 1840s Skiles suffered severe financial reversals; fire destroyed his steam mill twice. The Portage Railway deteriorated, and Skiles gradually acquired most of the original \$20,000 worth of shares in the operation. In December 1846 Skiles issued additional stock in the railway at \$100 per share. Adhering to the stock sale's conditions, Skiles invested \$5,000 in iron cars and in embanking the road. The shrewd entrepreneur agreed that if

the stock did not yield 10% within two years he would re-buy it at face value plus 10% or sell the iron cars to repay the stockholders. George Lehman was appointed road superintendent at this time. Some local historians believe the Bowling Green Portage Railway was the first tramway in the United States to use iron cars. At this time, horses still pulled the cars. It is possible that Skiles improved the roadbed so he could introduce a steam locomotive later.

In October 1849 Skiles and his family moved to Texas ostensibly to aid in the physical recovery of one of his children. On 12 January 1850 George Lehman became the Portage Railway's General Agent, and in February the Kentucky General Assembly amended its charter which set fines for trespassing and criminal damage to the road and its property. This charter amendment also demonstrated the status of the "peculiar institution" of slavery in Bowling Green. Any white person responsible for damages to "buildings, carriages, vehicles, machinery... or...signs" was required to pay a \$10 fine. If a "slave shall thus offend without the knowledge or direction from his master, he or she...shall receive any number of lashes, not exceeding thirty-nine." The charter amendment required masters instructing their slaves to damage railway property to pay the \$10 penalty. The company also reserved the right to sue in Circuit Court "for damages" if the offending party did not remit.⁷

The extent of damage to the Portage Railway due to vandalism is unknown, but someone did record at least one accident relating to the road. A wife writing to her husband in Washington, D.C., recounted the story:

A railroad accident occurred in our City a

few days since. The little boys of Town have been in the habit of swinging on the sides of the car as it approached the depot, and in attempting to do so, Edward Hodge lost his hold and fell backward, and the heavily laden baggage car passed over his right foot, mashing off the little toe and breaking three others. The poor fellow suffered great agony for some days but is now considered better.⁸

This accident indicates how few safety precautions the Portage Railway took for passengers or pedestrians, or perhaps it illustrates just how mischievous boys can be.

After several years of salutary neglect, the Portage Railway deteriorated, and Skiles began acquiring shares. This action led the heirs of Euclid M. Covington to file suit against Skiles for non-compliance with the original land grant. The Covington heirs claimed the company was no longer publicly owned but instead owned outright by Skiles and was not administered by a board of directors. This suit was dismissed in July 1852 and on 18 October 1853 Skiles sold 1.3 miles of the road to the Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) for \$20,883. The property sold to the L&N consisted of the line from the Barren River to Adams Street. Much of the abandoned right of way near Adams Street was sold to George Lehman and the line from Adams Street to the 10th Street Depot was abandoned. The Covington heirs then took Lehman to court, saying the land was no longer being used for a railroad and thus should be returned to them. This time they won.⁹ The Portage Railway was an interesting and early facet of Warren County's rail history. The L&N used the old railway's short line as a spur for over 100

years and several important Bowling Green industries located near the line.¹⁰

RUMBLINGS FOR MAINLINE SERVICE

The Portage Railway initiated Bowling Green's entry into rail service, but it is only a small footnote compared to the mainline service the L&N eventually provided the community. From its inception, the L&N was a well-conceived plan to extend the shipping interest of Louisville into all regions of the deep south. This comprehensive plan is apparent in the charter, where the mainline upon reaching Nashville would connect with the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad eventually reaching Atlanta and Charleston. The Lebanon Branch and its extensions were planned to reach Knoxville and ultimately the east coast. The Memphis Branch would link Memphis, the Mississippi River and finally the deep south and west with Louisville. From the start L&N leaders took well planned measures to insure the company's success.

Throughout the antebellum period Louisville vied with Cincinnati to control the Ohio River, and both cities searched for a more rapid and reliable means of transport to southern markets. Although turnpikes aided in connecting Louisville with the South, weather played a vital role in determining their viability. Louisville also had a jealous eye on Nashville, a serious competitor as a distribution center for the South when dry periods hampered river traffic. Although Louisville had a vested interest in river transportation, citizens soon realized a "railroad would not only avert commercial isolation, it would also neutralize Nashville and steal a march on Cincinnati in the quest for southern markets."¹¹

Agitation for a Louisville railroad that would capture the Southern market for the Falls City began as early as 1832. Proponents pointed to the instability of river transportation and the lethargic speed of stagecoaches traveling along the Louisville and Nashville Turnpike. A stagecoach leaving Nashville took 36 hours to reach Louisville. These coaches were pulled by twelve horses and reached the speed of twelve miles per hour. Besides the slow speed, coaches stopped every ten miles to change horses.

By 1849 with Charleston enjoying rail service, and the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad gaining ground, railroad fever spread throughout the Commonwealth. On 17 December 1849, citizens of Glasgow met to test support for a railroad from their fair city to Charleston via the Nashville and Chattanooga. They formed a committee to petition the Tennessee legislature for a charter from the Kentucky state line to Nashville. The committee contacted communities between the two points to determine support.

One week later on 24 December 1849, a meeting was held in Bowling Green calling for a Louisville to Nashville railroad. Resolutions were adopted to contact citizens of the two terminal cities and Senators from both states to seek federal aid for the road's construction. Louisville could no longer resist railroad fever. The Falls City faced the possibility of losing her status as the South's trade center. Nashville strengthened this threat when boosters intimated they planned to build a railroad through central Kentucky, stopping short of Louisville, thus capturing that city's market.

In early 1850 supporters convened a meeting in Louisville and elected a committee to secure a charter from the Kentucky legislature. The L&N's

original charter outlined a route via Elizabethtown and Bowling Green. To grant the company more flexibility in locating the road, leaders later removed specific community names from the charter. This allowed the company to determine the route based on financial commitments rather than strictly on the shortest line between two points. One Bowling Greener noted that local citizens were "anxious" that the railroad "should pass through this place. If such should be the case, our Town will make rapid progress in growth and improvement, and will be placed beyond the reach of the petty jealousy of its neighboring villages." Not completely magnanimous, the writer also noted: "I suppose it would enhance the value of property, which would be a good thing for us." Nearly a year later, the same writer added another reason that she desired Bowling Green to attract the railroad: "I hope we will get the railroad and then we will have a more enterprising population pouring in."¹²

THE BOWLING GREEN AND TENNESSEE RAILROAD

To insure that the railroad passed through their city, Bowling Green citizens convened a strategy session. "Some of the most progressive men in the community" attended the meeting, including J.E. Younglove, druggist; James Rumsey Skiles, the chief stockholder of the Portage Railway; Judge John B. Helm; James T. Donaldson, merchant; George B. Adams; Atwood G. Hobson, banker and financier; H.P. Murill; and pork packer Thomas Quigley. The men formed a committee which wrote a charter to present to the Kentucky legislature. Perhaps Bowling Green citizens conjectured that chartering its own railroad

represented its best chance at securing the L&N. This competitive railroad was most likely a scare tactic to be used as a trump in case the L&N neglected Bowling Green.

John E. Younglove, who attended that initial meeting and acted as the community's amateur historian and meteorologist, loaned credence to this hypothesis when he commented nearly fifty years later that "those who originated the scheme" are "due the credit of securing it [L&N] to us." Without a doubt, the L&N was going to challenge all territorial rivalries to increase possible pledges. Although Bowling Green was slightly larger than Glasgow in 1850, Barren County was larger with a population of 20,240 compared to Warren's 15,123. Bowling Green citizens may have felt that they could not win a bidding war with Glasgow for the L&N.¹³

The L&N received a charter on 5 March 1850, the same day the General Assembly chartered the Bowling Green and Tennessee (BG&T) Railroad. Commissioners for the BG&T included the leading citizens of Warren and Simpson Counties.¹⁴ The BG&T charter provided for construction of track from Bowling Green to the Tennessee state line in the direction of Nashville. The charter set the capital stock at one million dollars, divided into \$100 shares. When the commissioners sold one thousand shares of stock, investors could elect a board of directors. James T. Donaldson, who operated a store in Washington Hall, maintained the stock subscription books.¹⁵

With charters from the Kentucky and Tennessee legislatures, L&N supporters encouraged their Congressmen to introduce legislation that provided funding for the intrastate railroad. Several such bills met with indifference

and ultimate failure. This forced the company to seek county subscriptions and private funding for the road. The Kentucky General Assembly amended the L&N charter on 20 March 1851, allowing the company to locate the road according to the amount of county subscription.

In March 1851, one year after its chartering, the L&N still had not decided on a route. In July of 1851 the L&N placed survey parties in the field. Hardin County and Warren County each had subscribed \$300,000 to assure a spot on the line. Barren County eventually raised \$300,000. Nelson County, whose residents ostensibly wanted a railroad, failed to pass a \$300,000 subscription. The survey revealed two possible routes. The upper line passed through Bardstown, New Haven, Glasgow, Scottsville and Gallatin. The lower path went through Elizabethtown, Bowling Green and Franklin. Although longer, the upper route presented fewer engineering problems. To its advantage, the lower path passed large coal beds and lay close to the proposed Memphis Branch. On 29 September 1851 the L&N Board of Directors stated that its members had no preference as to which route would be chosen and that county subscriptions would largely determine its path. Perhaps the Board realized Bowling Green's enthusiasm for the project. The L&N's Tennessee charter stated the road must pass through Gallatin, possibly making the upper route more desirable. The Board's manipulation of the charter may have been a ploy to entice the upper route counties, such as Nelson and Barren counties to either make or raise their bids. When the upper route was determined to be the shorter, one Bowling Greener speculated that "the Glasgowians will crow accordingly".¹⁶

Frustrated in securing a definite spot on the L&N line, the BG&T Railroad commissioners made a call on subscriptions during the summer of 1851 and elected George B. Adams the road's president. This incident and the following sequence of events indicated the impatience of the Bowling Green citizenry with the L&N as well as their overwhelming desire to make sure a railroad went through their community.

In January 1851 Russellville petitioned the legislature for permission to raise a \$300,000 tax subscription to join the L&N on the Memphis Branch. The city also appealed to Louisville to choose the lower route for their road. At about the same time the people of Goodlettsville let it be known that they were not pleased with Gallatin's assured spot on the road. Goodlettsville citizens appealed to the Tennessee legislature to settle the dispute by accepting the L&N's Kentucky charter and revisions which allowed the route to be determined by the highest subscription. The involved parties settled this problem at a meeting held at the Davidson County Courthouse on 21 January 1852. Representatives from several Tennessee communities adopted resolutions favoring the upper route through Glasgow and Gallatin.

On 9 January 1852 the Kentucky General Assembly amended the BG&T Railroad's charter, allowing the company the privilege of obtaining county subscriptions to finance the line. Another amendment granted the company the power to build branch lines reaching to the Mississippi River. On 28 January 1852 the Tennessee legislature granted a charter to the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad. This charter stated the company could connect with any line

it saw fit at the Kentucky state boundary.

On 13 February 1852 the Tennessee legislature granted a charter to the BG&T to extend its tracks to Nashville, or to intersect with any railroad in Tennessee. The Tennessee charter of the BG&T was found in sections 8 through 12 of the Edgefield and Kentucky Railroad charter. The Tennessee legislature empowered this company to construct single or double tracks from the north side of the Cumberland River at Nashville to the Kentucky state line to unite with any company in existence or which might come into existence to connect the towns of Lexington, Frankfort, Louisville, Danville, Henderson and/or Bowling Green. The company was also allowed to branch west of Bowling Green and connect with the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad, thus reaching all the way to the Mississippi River. Elated, the BG&T leaders placed a survey party in the field to map the route from Bowling Green to Nashville.¹⁷

On 6 April 1852 a meeting held in Bowling Green tested support for the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad. Delegates appointed at the meeting met in Clarksville the next day. Representatives from Clarksville agreed to perform a survey from Clarksville to the Kentucky line, and attendees from Todd, Logan and Warren Counties agreed to do the same through their lands.

The BG&T Railroad now stood positioned to build not only a road to Nashville, but also form a connection with the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad at Guthrie, Kentucky. In addition to stock sales and Warren County's subscription, the BG&T could finance the road with Logan County's \$300,000 subscription and

a subscription from Todd County. The BG&T also anticipated the \$100,000 Simpson County subscription and perhaps subscriptions from Goodlettsville and Davidson County, Tennessee. If the line couldn't be built to Nashville, the company could expect to connect with the Edgefield and Kentucky railroad at some point in Tennessee.

CONSOLIDATION OF THE TWO LINES AND WORK BEGINS

The L&N again surveyed the route from Nashville to Bowling Green by Gallatin and found it added five miles to the route. The L&N could no longer ignore the threat of the competitive BG&T Railroad. On 29 May 1852 the L&N Board of Directors authorized President L.L. Shreve to negotiate a consolidation of the two companies. This again showed the foresight on the part of the L&N leadership. The BG&T Railroad had already finished the preparatory steps to make the Memphis connection, something the L&N badly wanted.

In June 1852 a consolidation of the two companies took place with the L&N receiving all stock, rights and privileges of the BG&T Railroad, as well as Warren County's proposed subscription of \$300,000. The County met this obligation by issuing bonds in three separate lots and by creating a railroad tax on property. Not everyone was happy with the demise of the BG&T. Elizabeth Cox Underwood, who had watched all the railroad mania in Bowling Green, wrote: "I believe the people here are all at loggerheads about the Railroad. The board of directors made a transfer of the whole matter to the Louisville company, and the Bowling Green and Nashville [Bowling