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**The
Early Railroad History
of
Warren County, Kentucky**

**Presented At Barnes and Nobel Bookstore
For
The L&N Railroad Historical Society**

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Bowling Green, situated along the Barren River, was settled in 1790. During the early history goods were generally purchased in Pennsylvania, brought to Louisville by river, then transported overland to Bowling Green. Local goods, mostly tobacco and pork, were shipped to New Orleans by flat boat. Once the trip ended in New Orleans the flat boats were sold and the return trip was made overland.

In 1828 the steam boat arrives in Bowling Green. This is due in part to the efforts of an early river entrepreneur named James Rumsey Skiles. Skiles had served in the Kentucky House of Representatives, where he helped secure a series of Locks and Dams on the Green and Barren River. The opening of these locks permitted steam boat travel into the area. While in the House of Representatives, he also lobbied for a railroad through Central Kentucky.

Bowling Green Portage Railroad

Bowling Greens railroad history began on February 11, 1836 when the Kentucky General Assembly granted a charter to James Rumsey Skiles, James G. Pitts, and Jacob VanMeter for the Bowling Green Portage Railroad. This is the second railroad chartered and built in Kentucky.

The charter granted the construction of one or more tracks, wharves or landings and depots and warehouses as necessary to be constructed within two years or the charter would be voided. The purpose of this railroad was to move passengers and freight from the river to downtown Bowling Green. The line was 1.3 miles long and parallel to Church Avenue to about Clay Street where it ran between the current Adams and Kentucky Streets to 10th Avenue, And then along 10th Avenue to the depot at the site of the Old Warren County Court House. This depot was described as not much more than a fruit stand.

The railroad likely used slave labor to construct the road which was completed in June of 1836. The rails consisted of steel straps attached to cedar rails with no cross ties. Goods and passengers were transported on horse drawn wooden cars described as platforms on wheels. Many of the ties were uncovered in 1921 when 10th ave was prepared for paving. These ties were reported to be in good condition and collected by souvenir hunters.

By 1846 Skiles had acquired most of the original \$20,000 in stocks. The road had fallen into disrepair. On December 21, 1846, Skiles issued additional stock in the road. The sale of the stock was to finance the repairs to the road. The condition of the stock sale was that Skiles invest \$4,000 for iron cars and embankment of the road. Skiles agreed that if the stocks didn't yield 10% within two years he would re-buy the stock at face value plus 10%.

The iron cars would be sold to repay the stock. The Portage railroad is believed to be the first in the country to use iron cars.

The Bowling Green and Tennessee Railroad

During the period of 1820 to 1850 Louisville businesses were in competition with Cincinnati for southern markets. Louisville wants to extend its shipping interest into the deep south. Prior to the railroad this region was dependant on the river for the transportation of goods and people. This was often hampered by the low water or flooding which made the river an undependable and often unusable method of transportation. The overland route between Louisville and Nashville was known as the Kentucky Turnpike. This road had an eastern route that went through Glasgow and Bardstown, and a western route that went through Bowling Green and Elizabethtown. As time passed, this highway saw an increase in traffic as a result of undependable river transportation. During this period the trip from Nashville to Louisville took 36 hours by stage coach. Coaches were required to stop about every 10 miles to change horses.

During the 1830's railroad fever is ramped in America. Kentucky was no different. By 1849 the sea port of Charleston has rail traffic. The Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad is also gaining ground. The Nashville and Chattanooga would connect with railroads that will extend to Atlanta and Charleston.

On December 17, 1849, the citizens of Glasgow, Kentucky held a meeting to test support for a Glasgow to Charleston Railroad. A committee was formed to ask the Tennessee Legislature for a charter from the Kentucky state line to Nashville. The committee was also to contact communities between the two cities and test support for the railroad.

A week later on December 24, 1849 Citizens of Bowling Green met calling for a Louisville to Nashville railroad. Resolutions were adopted to contact senators from both states and citizens from both cities to ask for federal support.

Louisville, which had resisted the idea of a railroad for some years, could no longer resist the idea of a railroad. The city was faced with the threat of losing her status as a trade center for the south. This threat was driven home when Nashville threatened to build a railroad through Kentucky stopping short of Louisville thus capturing Louisville's market.

The L&N Railroad was a well-conceived plan to extend Louisville's shipping interest into the deep south. As conceived the Memphis branch would reach the Mississippi River and the deep south. The Lebanon Branch could reach Knoxville and ultimately the east coast. At Nashville it could connect with the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad.

In early 1850 a committee from Louisville was elected to secure a charter from the Kentucky Legislature. On March 5, 1850, the charter was granted. The charter called for a railroad from Louisville to Bowling Green by way of Elizabethtown. The names were later dropped allowing the company to locate the road where it thought best.

On this same day a charter was also granted to the Bowling Green and Tennessee Railroad. This commission was made up of citizens from Warren and Simpson counties

including James Rumsey Skiles, Atwood Hobson, George Adams and others. This charter granted the construction of track from Bowling Green in the direction of Nashville. Capital Stock was set at \$1,000,000 at \$100 shares. After 1,000 shares were sold, notice could be given for election of the board of directors. The books were opened in the store of J.T. Donaldson at Washington hall (the corner where Hillard and Lyons is now located).

After chartering the L&N a bill was introduced into U.S. Congress seeking federal aid in construction of the road. The bill met indifference and failed. The company was now forced to seek county subscriptions and private funding for construction of the road. In March 1851, a year after chartering, the L&N had still not decided the route.

In July of 1851 the L&N placed survey crews in the field. Warren and Hardin Counties (E-Town) both made \$300,000 subscriptions. Glasgow eventually made a \$300,000 subscription, and Nelson county who had also long wanted a railroad failed to pass a \$300,000 subscription. The survey revealed two possible routes the upper route would pass through Bardstown, New Haven, Glasgow, Scottsville and Gallatin. The lower route would pass through Elizabethtown, Bowling Green and Franklin. The upper route was longer but had fewer engineering problems than the airline route which lay close to the proposed Memphis branch. On September 29, 1851, the L&N announced they had no preference as to which route would be chosen and that county subscriptions would largely determine the route.

The L&N may have realized Bowling Greens enthusiasm early on. The company may still have favored the upper route, as the Tennessee charter stated the road must pass through Gallatin. The company's statement may have been a ploy to entice Barren and Nelson and other counties to make subscribers or raise subscription bids.

In the summer of 1851, Bowling Green had been unable to secure a place on the L&N. The Bowling Green and Tennessee made the call on subscription and elected George B. Adams the President of the company. The events to follow indicate Bowling Greens impatience with the L&N and its overwhelming desire to build its own railroad.

In January 1851 Russellville petitioned the legislature for permission to raise a \$300,000 tax subscription to join the L&N's Memphis branch. It also appealed for the company to chose the airline route. As mentioned earlier the L&N's Tennessee charter stated the line must pass though Gallatin. This angered the citizens of Goodlettsville. This ended with the Tennessee Legislature accepting the Kentucky charter revisions stating subscriptions would determine the route. Gallatin now faced a bidding war with Goodlettsville. A meeting was held at the Davidson County Court House on January 21, 1852 to settle the question. Resolutions were adopted favoring the upper route through Glasgow and Gallatin.

On January 9, 1852, the Bowling Green and Tennessee charter was amended by the Kentucky legislature. This revision granted the company the same provisions as the L&N charter permitting the company to seek county subscriptions. This also gave the company the power to build branch lines reaching the Mississippi River. On January 28, 1852, the Tennessee Legislature granted a charter to the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville railroad. This charter stated the company could connect with any company it saw fit at the Kentucky state line.

On February 13, 1852, the Tennessee Legislature granted the Bowling Green and Tennessee Railroad a charter. This was included in sections 8-12 of the Edgefield and Kentucky Railroad charter. This charter gave them the right to build track from the North side of the Cumberland river to the Kentucky state line to connect with any road in existence or which may come into existence to connect with Lexington, Frankfort, Louisville, Danville Henderson and or Bowling Green.

On April 6, 1852, a meeting was held in Bowling Green to test support for the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad. Delegates were appointed to meet in Clarksville the next day. The Clarksville meeting ended with delegates from Todd, Logan and Warren counties agreeing to make surveys through their counties. It also left the task of securing legislative sanctions to connect with the L&N.

At this point the Bowling Green and Tennessee Railroad was positioned to use county subscriptions to build a line south through Simpson county and Goodlettsville Tennessee and into Nashville, or to connect with the Edgefield and Kentucky Railroad at some point in Tennessee. It also stood to use Logan and Todd counties' subscription to build a line to the state line connecting with The Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad thus reaching the Mississippi River. Survey parties were put into the field to determine the route.

The L&N again surveyed the line from Louisville to Bowling Green and Nashville by way of Gallatin and found it only added five miles to the route. The L&N could no longer ignore the threat of a competitive Bowling Green Railroad. On May 29, 1852, the L&N board of directors authorized the President L.L. Shreve to negotiate a consolidation of the two companies. In June 1852 a consolidation of the two companies took place. The L&N received all stock, rights and privileges of the Bowling Green and Tennessee Railroad as well as the county subscriptions. Thus, Bowling Green had achieved what it set out to do, secure a point on the L&N mainline. But not all citizens of the county were happy about this decision. Elizabeth Cox Underwood, who had watched the railroad mania wrote:

"I believe the people here are all at loggerheads (at difference) about the railroad. The board of directors made a transfer of the whole matter to the Louisville company, and the Bowling Green and Nashville is defunct I believe. Some of the townsmen talked of turning out the Directors and electing a new board, Rumsey Skiles being among the most violent."

Construction of the L&N Mainline

On April 13, 1853, the L&N board of Directors gave the contract for construction to the Morton, Seymour and Company. The terms were of the agreement were that Morton, Seymour and company would provide labor and materials and deliver to the L&N within two and half years a railroad. The L&N would pay \$35,000 per mile. Work began on May 2, 1853 and continued until May of 1854 when work stopped for financial reasons. Equipment had been purchased and grading had began in all four divisions but no track was ready for the movement of cars.

Work was began on the line in four divisions: Louisville, Nashville, Lebanon Junction, and Bowling Green. Bowling Green in the third division extended from Bells Station (Park

failing to explode. Josie Underwood Nazro, a Warren county native who had been forced from her home by the Confederate army, was staying with friends in a house across from the depot. She wrote the following account:

At about 9:00 that night, five Texas Rangers dashed up to the depot. Three got off while two held the horses. In a moment they had lighted torches in their hand, rushing in and out of the depot and other buildings. Soon they were on fire and flames were bursting out everywhere. When their work was surely accomplished, they leaped on their horses and galloped away, leaving behind a fearful and magnificent sight. By morning, nothing was left of the railroad buildings but twisted iron and red glowing ashes, with a odor of burning bacon and corn permeating the atmosphere for some distance"

On the morning of February 15, Union forces entered Bowling Green to find the depot, roundhouse, machine shops and other structures burned. A good part of the downtown area including Washington Hall was also burned. The Confederate forces had retreated south of Nashville returning to the L&N the mainline to Edgefield Tennessee, just north of Nashville.

High water had prevented the rebuilding the Barren River bridge until early March. Then the new bridge was opened on April 8, 1862 restoring service from Louisville to Edgefield Tennessee. Construction of the new depot was nearing completion in October of 1862 as well as other structures. The reconstruction depot sat on the same spot as the first depot at Main Street. This depot and platform, through time, underwent a series of additions and extensions and ultimately consisted of two structures connected by a breeze way. These structures sat on a cigar shaped covered platform. The platform was about 410 feet long and 15 feet wide at the south end and 45 feet at the north end. This structure would survive until the current depot was constructed in 1925.

The L&N suffered great losses during the Civil War but came out better than most of the other railroads in the region. Though some Bowling Green citizens were dissatisfied with consolidation of the two roads the town likely made a wise decision. By 1870 the city was thriving and largely due to the L&N. While other railroads that would have connected to the Bowling Green and Tennessee had gone into receivership and were purchased by the L&N.