

The Biggest Mamba Jamba in Town

By Nina & Jake Elsas, The Patch Works Art And History Center

In last month's blurb, we left off at the glorious emergence of Atlanta, railroads and all. Ever since, for over 175 years, railroads have been a blessing to the city... then a curse... then a blessing... and now a bit of both.



After that epic brouhaha over naming conventions ended, the newly coronated Atlanta quickly lived up to expectations.

Trains galore chugged through Atlanta's environs, making her a beaucoup player in the world of moving-a-bunch-of-stuff-around. And although there were initially three lines

converging on the town – *Western and Atlantic*, the *Macon and Western* (née Monroe), and the *Georgia Railroad* – for the sake of this discussion, let's spotlight the third heavyweight contender.

Right out of the gate, the Georgia Railroad kicked some choo-choo butt. This route – an extension from Augusta – played a significant role in defining Atlanta's raison d'être. "Why," you ask? Oy. Let's back it up again... rewind!

In 1830, the first railroad in Georgia came down from Charleston, failed to swim across the Savannah River, and languished on the muddy banks across from Augusta. In 1833, a gaggle of Savannah-based business tycoons, fearful they'd be fighting for their financial lives against sinister Charlestonian yankees, concluded their port needed access to the rich soil of middle Georgia. They chartered the *Central Rail Road and Canal Company* and... immediately fired their canal division (how do you run a canal to Macon???)

Forgoing imaginary waterways and focusing instead on trains, this plucky yet erroneously named company developed the *Central Rail Road of Georgia*, which ran 190 miles from Savannah, through fertile cotton fields, and stopped at Macon. The company eventually dropped the "canal" from its name and adopted the more-relevant yet syntax-challenged *Central of Georgia Railway*.

Anyway, score a big win for the businessmen of coastal Georgia! Well, 1833 was apparently a busy year for Georgia railroads. At the same time Central Rail Road was getting laid (lucky railroad), two other train lines also started getting laid (more good times): the itty-bitty Monroe Railroad that ran between Macon and Forsyth, AND... the Georgia Railroad.

Riding the 1833 train-wave, a group of wealthy Athenians chartered the *Georgia Railroad Company* ('cuz Athens wasn't about to be outdone by no Savannahians). These wily Athenian moguls took it one step further, never intending to stop at Athens. They had vision, yes they had. They plotted how to push their railroad into Georgia's heart of darkness, lobbying like lobbyists do for a western route that would extend into the distant unknown.

Well, here's the one time private industry and government miraculously found common ground. The state-owned Western and Atlantic, which in the mid-1830s was gunning for the Tennessee and Ohio Valleys via Chattanooga, opted to terminate the southern end of its line in northwest Georgia (yes, we're back to this plot line).

The Athenian-owned Georgia Railroad (along with the itty-bitty Monroe) shook hands with the bureaucrats and agreed to have a three-way in some backwater plot of land (cue a ten-year identity crisis). Fortunately Atlanta found her mojo right on time... in 1845... when the Georgia Railroad was completed (beating those W&A bureaucrats by six years, thereupon bolstering the self-perceived superiority of Fat Cats).

So, why, why, WHY do we keep blabbing about these infernally boring trains??? Well, that track just north of Cabbagetown... you know the one... the one that currently causes our ears to bleed and houses to crack asunder... that track was once the mighty Georgia Railroad. And it was the biggest mamba jamba in town. But not necessarily in a good way. While this line blessed Atlanta with an impressive economic engine (pun), it also cursed the city from day one.

Firstly, 162+ slaves were forced to lay that track, for which the railroad's modern financiers finally apologized in 2005. Secondly, during the Civil War, it became an unparalleled lifeline for the Confederacy, transporting hundreds of thousands of troops, as well as materials for the war-effort. Probably the most infamous asset the railroad offered, however, was a factory that sat on its edge. A factory built in 1858, initially to refurbish those well-worn tracks. A factory that assumed another role, during the Civil War, when it constructed weapons and armor plating for gunships. A factory that became the #1 target for General Sherman on his mass-destruction March.

Conceived as the *Atlanta Rolling Mill*, it rebranded as the *Confederate Rolling Mill*, with its inevitable demise occurring only six years after its birth. In 1864, the mill was blown to smithereens. But not by Sherman... nah... but by Confederate General J.B. Hood.

It is well-understood that the Confederate Rolling Mill's destruction turned the tide of that wearisome war, removing any northern doubt, eventually propelling Lincoln and the Union to victory. It also, simultaneously, cleared the way for Cabbagetown. Literally.

Just Do It

During our April CNIA meeting on Zoom we will elect a Vice President, Communication Chair, and HLPV Chair.

Wanna run? Email president@cabbagetown.com