

A Guide to the John Fletcher Railroad Memorabilia Collection, 1896; 1908-1921; n.d.

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Descriptive Summary

Collection number

SC 0085

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English

Abstract

This collection consists of timetables and other documents relating to various railroads in the DC area of Northern Virginia. Some documents are originals and others are photocopies of originals. Timetables for the railways include those for the Falls Church Division of the Washington-Virginia Railway Company, the Bluemont Division of the Washington & Old Dominion Railway, the Great Falls Division of the Washington & Old Dominion Railway, the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad Company, and the Washington, Arlington & Falls Church Electric Railway Company. With the exception of one, the source of which is unclear, the photographs are photocopies from Herbert H. Harwood's *Rails to the Blue Ridge: The Washington and Old Dominion Railroad 1847-1968*. Other documents include a hand-drawn map showing the path of the W&OD through Ashburn during the late-nineteenth century, an illustration of "Early Trains of America," a photocopy of the cover of an official map of Washington published by the Estey Organ Company, and an Information/Travel brochure from the Standard Guide Information Office in Washington.

Creator

John W. Fletcher, Round Hill, VA.

Repository

Thomas Balch Library

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Collection open for research .

Use Restrictions

No physical characteristics affect use of this material.

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John W. Fletcher, Round Hill, VA.

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Related Material

Harwood, Herbert H. *Rails to the Blue Ridge: The Washington and Old Dominion Railroad 1847-1968*. Fairfax Station, VA.: Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (2000), VREF 385.97 HAR.

Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Rail Road Account Book, Guilford, VA 1860-1868 (M 002), Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, VA.

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Rails to the Blue Ridge: The Washington and Old Dominion Railroad 1847-1968 Netherton, Nan. Fairfax County, Virginia: A History. Fairfax County Board of Supervisors (1978). Northern Virginia Heritage: A Journal of Local History The Washington Post Virginia Railway Depots

Other Finding Aid

None

Technical Requirements

None

Historical Information

Railroads in Northern Virginia were an essential means of transportation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They not only ferried commuters back and forth from the cities, introducing rural communities to city life, but also provided a means of growth for many small towns.

The Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac (RF&P), chartered on 25 February 1834, was the first railroad to link Washington, D.C. to Richmond, Virginia. It ran through Fredericksburg and ended at a point on the Potomac River. Service began on 13 February 1836 and the line from Richmond to the Potomac was completed in 1842. In 1906, the RF&P opened Potomac Yard, a station that served multiple railroads. In 1988, the railroad expanded to form a holding company, the RF&P Corporation, which separated its railroad from its real estate holdings. The CSX Corp. bought the RF&P Railroad in the 1990s, and it continues as part of that system today.

The Washington, Arlington & Falls Church Railroad (WA&FC) was Fairfax County's first electric railway, established in 1888. The entire railway covered only 20 miles in two separate branches, one that reached the City of Fairfax and the other ending at the Nauck Springs picnic grounds in Alexandria County. Prior to the railroad, the county suffered greatly from the lack of a reliable mode of transportation. Five attempts to build a railroad line linking Fairfax County to Washington occurred between 1865 and 1888, but none succeeded. With the development of the electric railway, attempts to build a railroad reaching Fairfax County met with more success. Between 1890 and 1896, two companies built lines to northern Fairfax County: the Washington, Alexandria & Mount Vernon Railway Co. and the Washington & Arlington Railway Co (W&A). The W&A went bankrupt in 1894, and was bought in 1895 with plans for expansion. Renamed the Washington, Arlington & Falls Church Railroad (WA&FC), it acquired electric cars and by 19 September 1896 had almost reached East Falls Church. In August 1900 the railroad's owners expanded the line into Fairfax County, and by the spring of 1901 the line ran from East Falls Church in Alexandria County to West Falls Church in Fairfax County. Falls Church prospered with the addition of the railroad, but Vienna and the City of Fairfax still lacked transportation. The communities encouraged companies other than the WA&FC to build railways, and in 1901 three different companies attempted do so with no success. It was not until October 1903 that the WA&FC finally began to extend the railway deeper into Fairfax County. In spite of complications, in just a little over a year the train ran to the city of Fairfax. Housing developments sprang up along the line, and trains brought in commuters from the city, changing Fairfax County permanently.

In June of 1910, the WA&FC merged with the Washington, Alexandria & Mount Vernon Railroad to create the Washington-Virginia Railway Company. The company went bankrupt in 1924 due to business losses, mostly from the increased use of autos. It split into two parts again in 1927: the Washington, Alexandria & Mount Vernon Railroad and the Arlington & Fairfax Electric Railway Company.

The Washington & Old Dominion Railroad (W&OD) had a profound effect on northern Virginia despite its lack of financial success throughout most of its life. Initially built to boost the declining commercial power of Alexandria, Virginia, the W&OD provided both freight and passenger transportation to the D.C. area. In the early 1800s, Alexandria was a thriving commercial seaport. In 1828 Alexandria began to face competition from the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O), which transferred commerce to Baltimore. The B&O provided faster, cheaper transportation, and business in Alexandria began to drop drastically. Recognizing the need for a railroad, Lewis McKenzie (1810-1895) and George Smoot (n.d.) formed a plan to build the Alexandria & Harper's Ferry Railroad (A&HF). The A&HF was to join at Harper's Ferry with the independent Winchester & Potomac Railroad (W&P) and expand west, but the B&O acquired the W&P before the plan could be realized. In 1853 the Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad (AL&H) was started anew by Smoot with the help of McKenzie and Cassius F. Lee (1808-1890). The project began in Alexandria in February 1855, but progress was slow, and the railroad only reached Leesburg in 1858. In 1859, limited freight and passenger service began, and in 1860 full passenger service to Leesburg was finally offered. During the Civil War, the AL&H was taken over by the Union and the eastern part was used as a supply line for the Union, while much of the western part was destroyed by the Confederates. After the Civil War, the railroad never recovered its former business.

In 1870, McKenzie decided to change the route of the AL&H to the Ohio River in West Virginia. Hoping to get off to a new start, he renamed the railroad the Washington & Ohio Railroad (W&O). The W&O extended

toward Purcellville and Round Hill, but again insufficient funds halted progress, and in 1878 the W&O went into bankruptcy. The business was bought and reorganized as the Washington & Western Railroad (W&W) in 1882. The W&W was short-lived, however, and in 1883 it was bought by New York interests who renamed it the Washington, Ohio & Western Railroad (WO&W). In 1894, J.P. Morgan's New York banking branch bought the railroad and incorporated it into the giant Southern Railway system. The former WO&W was extended to Bluemont, a popular vacation spot for Washington, D.C. dwellers, and the railroad was used primarily to ferry the tourists back and forth.

The early 1900s brought the popularization of electric trolley lines, and in 1903 John R. McLean (1848-1916) and Senator Stephen B. Elkins (1841-1911) began construction of an electric line to another popular tourist spot, Great Falls. The finished Great Falls & Old Dominion Railroad (GF&OD) line ended in Georgetown and began service in March 1906. The GF&OD was highly popular, and small towns began to spring up along the line, bringing in even more commuters. The Bluemont line of the Southern Railway ran nearly parallel to the GF&OD, and McLean entered into a contract with Southern Railway that leased the Bluemont line to him. The new railroad was christened the Washington & Old Dominion Railway.

The W&OD was plagued with problems from the start. When the day arrived for the W&OD to begin service, the new cars the company had ordered were not ready and the Bluemont Division had not yet been electrified, but remained a steam line. Moreover, the railroad was run very casually; it owned a random assortment of cars recycled from various other railways, and the published timetables were never accurate. In spite of excellent business, especially from the Great Falls Division, the W&OD lost over \$107,000 in 1913. McLean died in 1916, exacerbating the company's problems. Things began to look up for the W&OD in the 1920s; the Bluemont Division was finally fully electrified in 1916 and in 1923 the company built a new terminal at Rosslyn. Despite the improvements business fell dramatically, as the end of World War I brought changes in taste with regard to amusement as well as increased use of cars for transportation. In 1932, the W&OD went bankrupt and was put into receivership.

In 1936, under the new management of George C. Baggett (1882-1956), the W&OD was shut down piece by piece until the only remaining line ran from Washington to Purcellville. The railroad continued to provide freight service, but passenger service was discontinued entirely in 1941, with the exception of a few years under emergency conditions during WWII. In 1955, the company was sold to the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway, which hoped to use it for coal transportation. The coal scheme fell through, but the railroad prospered nonetheless with the construction of Dulles International Airport, which gave it excellent freight business. Despite its profits, the railroad faced critical competition from the expanding highway system. In 1965, the W&OD went out of business and sold most of its property to the Virginia Department of Highways. The original line was sold and converted to a hiking/biking trail, completed in 1988.

Scope and Content

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Arrangement

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