

# Major-league franchise with a small-town demeanor

Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac linked the North and the South with a flat, straight, double-track raceway

FOR MOST OF THE 157 YEARS it "linked North and South" under its original name, the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad was the coveted brass ring dangling just beyond the grasp of rival politicians, vying financiers, and warring armies. Even at the bitter end, a tense proprietary struggle ensued before the Commonwealth of Virginia, with its 20 percent stake, finally abdicated guardianship of the rich little railroad in 1991, allowing its vast real-estate holdings (which included priceless metropolitan Richmond and northern Virginia acreage) to be shorn from RF&P's 113 miles of double-track main line.

CSX, successor to RF&P's long-time suitors, gained control of the railroad physical plant, while the Virginia State Retirement System kept control of the trackless real estate under the auspices of the RF&P Corp. Even custody of its Washington Redskins NFL season tickets figured into the final dissolution. (Once given away as inducements to generate passenger traffic, the ducats were later used as a means by which to solicit the ears of the influential.) Ownership of RF&P's lone business car, heavyweight *One* (no mere numeral for it!), was no less hotly contested.

**Symbolic of RF&P's monopoly on Florida passenger service north of Richmond is this lineup of E and F units on five trains at Broad Street station, whose balloon-track orientation resulted in all trains, regardless of direction, pointed north.**

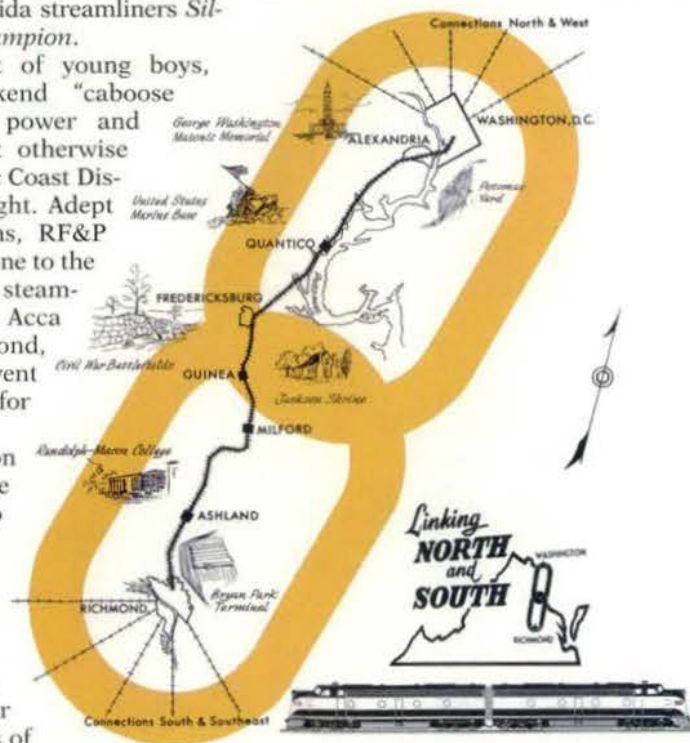
RF&P was a major-league franchise with a small-town demeanor. There was so much kinship on the payroll that employee gatherings often resembled family reunions. Although its main line was as busy as any in the country, each year freight crews arriving at Potomac Yard on the north end on Christmas Eve were allowed to return to Richmond "cab light" (engines and caboose only) to be at home. Santa Claus Specials received no less preference en route than the tony Florida streamliners *Silver Meteor* and *Champion*.

To the delight of young boys, RF&P ran weekend "caboose trains" utilizing power and rolling stock that otherwise forwarded Atlantic Coast Dispatch redball freight. Adept at public relations, RF&P even invited everyone to the demolition of the steam-era facilities at Acca Yard in Richmond, proclaiming the event "Topple the Tipple for Progress."

Restrictions on clearances in the tunnel leading to Washington Union Station dictated the design of RF&P's passenger steam locomotives, which were named to honor legendary generals of

the Confederacy, governors of Virginia, and other prominent men of the Old Dominion. The arrival of 20 E8 diesels (15 A's and 5 B's)—painted, naturally, in blue and gray with gold trim—was toasted on a statewide broadcast by Gov. William Tuck.

A flat, straight raceway, RF&P in dieseldom eschewed dynamic braking, six-axle freight power, and—after its 22 Alco S2's built from World War II-restrictive 1942 through 1948—anything



STEVEN DOYCHAK





DAVID B. DAVIES

non-EMD. (The Alcos were replaced by 5 SW1200's and 9 SW1500's in the late '60's.) Rare indeed are photos that don't feature duets or trios of RF&P's 20 spit-shine-polished F7's of 1949-50 or (later) 8 GP35's and 7 GP40's traversing its meticulously maintained right of way. (RF&P's last new units were 7 GP40-2's in 1972.) An RF&P tradition, shared as far as is known only by the South Shore Line, was "directional diesels"—even-numbered units pointed north and odd-numbered units pointed south. Freight locomotives regularly averaged 1½ daily round trips, often ending with a steam-cleaning of running gear and ventilation systems performed at the road's Bryan Park Shops.

Although it was surveyed in 1834 and granted, in an 1851 charter, the right to forge north to Alexandria, RF&P didn't reach the Potomac River until after the Civil War when PRR subsidiary Washington Southern (the combined Alexandria & Washington and Alexandria & Fredericksburg) marched south to join it at Quantico in 1872. Thus was completed an all-rail route between Richmond and Washington.

Granted route exclusivity by the Virginia legislature for 30 years, RF&P had crept from Richmond only 20 miles to

**The inevitable merger is already predicted in December 1986 as RF&P hustles CSX's *Orange Blossom Special* freight south near Aquia, Va., behind GP's painted for RF&P, CSX components Seaboard System and Chessie System, and CSX itself. RF&P's pioneering train-control and cab-signal system required its own units to lead.**

the South Anna River when service began in 1836. By year's end it entered Fredericksburg. Travelers endured a journey by train, stagecoach, and steamship to reach Washington until rails were laid north to Aquia Creek in 1842. The belief that the American Civil War would be ended by the capture of either Richmond or Washington meant that the RF&P was under almost constant attack, someplace. When hostilities erupted in 1861, barges laden with complete trains including locomotives, Union soldiers, munitions, and supplies intended for the bloody sieges of Fredericksburg were floated down the Potomac to the Aquia Creek railhead.

RF&P was continually ravaged by flanking Confederate cavalry or intentionally sabotaged by retreating Union forces. The rebuilding of the Potomac Creek trestle in 1862 remains an engineering legend, accomplished in a record nine working days by troops under



TOP, BRUCE D. FALES; ABOVE, BRUCE R. MEYER COLLECTION

the command of U.S. Military Railroad Construction Corps superintendent Gen. Herman Haupt. An astonished President Abraham Lincoln, upon seeing the hastily erected wooden structure, marveled that it appeared to be built of nothing more than bean poles and corn stalks.

Although financially and physically devastated by the war, RF&P was a gateway to the "New South" and immediately benefited from a surge in freight and an influx of passengers. Admittedly, many of the latter were "carpetbaggers," as locals referred to the opportunistic entrepreneurs who resurrected the Old South at considerable profit to themselves. The railroad, while in the enviable position to simply collect tribute for permitting the exchange of raw materials and finished product, actively courted industrial development that generated much on-line business that provided a desperately needed boost to the economy of Virginia.

The battle for control of the "Rich-

mond-Washington Line," as RF&P also called itself, escalated when the war ended. Finally, in 1901, its six connecting railroads (Atlantic Coast Line, Seaboard Air Line, Southern, Chesapeake & Ohio, Baltimore & Ohio, and Pennsylvania) agreed not only to share equal ownership and handling of traffic through the newly incorporated Richmond-Washington Company, but built and granted trackage rights into newly constructed Washington Union Station.

The heavily traveled route was double-tracked during 1902-07. Meantime, Potomac Yard south of Washington was opened in 1906 and operated under a shared equity formula. An ambitious project that culminated with the 1919 opening of Richmond's Broad Street Station, designed by John Russell Pope, had the added advantage of eliminating street-running in downtown Richmond. The station had an innovative "loop" track arrangement whereby all trains pointed north regardless of direction of travel. Until a





HERBERT H. HARWOOD JR.

In steam, RF&P was best known for its named 4-8-4's (opposite page), but in 1943 it needed freight power fast and bought 10 Lima 2-8-4's, identical to Nickel Plate S-1's 730-739; one of the RF&P 571-580 series descended Franconia Hill in 1947 (above). RF&P 552 *General T. J. Jackson* was at Potomac Yard right after delivery in 1937 (top left); 613 *John Marshall* (left) was the first of 10 named for famous Virginians.

1970's structure was built adjacent to Acca Yard, RF&P's general offices remained in Broad Street, which was operated by the jointly owned (with ACL) Richmond Terminal Company.

Early RF&P trains were directed by timetable and train order, later augmented by the telegraph. The first semaphore signals appeared in 1897, replaced by color-light signals in 1930's. The road's quaint wooden interlocking towers survived long enough that at least one of the brick structures which replaced them was itself supplanted by Centralized Traffic Control before being put into use!

While RF&P's double track was signaled for reverse running, its innovative (but incompatible) 60Hz train-control and cab-signal system, which dated to the steam era, negated the need for wayside signals on the opposite side of the right of way except at interlockings. This also effectively thwarted encroachment by foreign-line power. Except for a few retrofitted

Chessie locomotives, newer and mightier CSX and Conrail behemoths were still obliged to humbly trail older, four-axle blue-and-gray EMD's between Acca and "Pot Yard" until the late 1990's, when the Alexandria facility was bulldozed and transformed into a characterless big-box retail center and the train control system converted to Northeast Corridor-standard 100Hz.

Excluding the 3-mile James River Branch, ACL's grand arched entrance into Richmond, the RF&P had but one offshoot: 10 miles of an acquired government line to the Dalghren Naval Testing Grounds. Other than an egregious miscalculation of capacity that resulted in the unfortunate construction of a single-track replacement bridge over Quantico Creek in the early 1990's (today the bane of CSX dispatchers, Virginia Railway Express commuters, and Amtrak passengers), little has changed physically on the RF&P since the line was straightened and double-tracked a century ago.

The embattled property has finally been conquered and divided, and today CSX operates the line as the RF&P and Richmond Terminal Subdivisions. But consider this: While it appears that every effort has been made to erase the last vestige of Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac glory from the Virginia Piedmont, aside from displaying huge letters on their flanks, most of the locomotives that daily ply the hallowed rails today are still blue and gray. ■

## RF&P fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1990)

**Route-miles:** 118; 113

**Locomotives:** 101; 31

**Passenger cars:** 117; 41 (1970)

**Freight cars:** 1318; 1876

**Headquarters city:** Richmond, Va.

**Notable postwar passenger trains:** Participated in operation of New York-Florida trains of Seaboard Air Line (*Silver* fleet) and Atlantic Coast Line (*Champions*).

**Recommended reading:** *One Hundred Fifty Years of History Along the RF&P*, by William E. Griffin (RF&P, 1983).

**Source:** *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999).