

# West Point Route: the South's fraternal twins

A&WP and WofA first met at their namesake Georgia town, but were of different gauges



C. K. Marsh Jr. collection



I. W. King photo; Joel King collection

The *Crescent* hustles west from Atlanta in 1946 behind now-preserved A&WP 4-6-2 290 and at Fairburn, Ga., in June '56 behind three diesels.

First the tracks were built east. Then west. Then west some more. Such were the uncertain beginnings of what became the West Point Route. Construction began on the banks of the navigable Alabama River at Montgomery, the capital. During 1834–41, 32 miles of standard-gauge track extended east toward both West Point and Columbus, Ga., the latter to be on a 29-mile branch. A new corporation, the Montgomery & West Point Rail Road, assumed the work in 1843, and over eight years built to West Point, a total distance of 88 miles. The terrain was easy, crossing no summits or water courses except the Chattahoochee River at West Point. In 1854, the long-planned branch to Columbus was completed, diverging from the main at Opelika, Ala.

Some years earlier, another project, the Atlanta & LaGrange Rail Road, with backing from the Georgia Road ["Fallen Flags Remembered," Fall 2009 CT], had started building 5-foot-gauge track west from East Point, 6 miles south of downtown Atlanta on the Central of Georgia, toward LaGrange, an established town 65 miles away. It took five years to build through LaGrange to the more natural destination of West Point, 87 miles from Atlanta. The near-physical connection with the M&WP did have a defect: the different track gauges, which required

all interchange traffic be transferred.

Wood-burning 4-4-0's of both roads plied their routes while crews tried to keep pine-knot sparks from incinerating either the major goods—cotton—or the frocks of Southern belle riders. Connecting passenger service allowed through travel the 175 miles between Atlanta and Montgomery with only a cross-platform walk. The A&LG was renamed Atlanta & West Point in 1857, and as time passed, the firms evolved into something akin to fraternal twins.

Such was the situation when the Civil War began in April 1861. During the conflict, business boomed on both roads. Troops and materiel flowed back and forth as military actions rose and ebbed to the west and north. In the conflict's final months, devastation struck both segments as General Sherman's Union troops obliterated over a dozen miles of track near Atlanta while another two dozen around Opelika succumbed to General Rousseau's troops.

One of the few blessings of the separate gauges was that the standard-gauge M&WP, being an island in the 5-foot-gauge South, did not have its equipment transferred to other lines. Both the M&WP and A&WP managed to shift equipment back and forth away from Union forces with some success, but when blue uniforms prevailed on the

M&WP, it could not remove its rolling stock and much was destroyed. On April 16, 1865, Union cavalry raided West Point and destroyed the Chattahoochee River bridge, the depot, and most track.

After the war, both roads were rebuilt. During August 1866, the M&WP gauge was broadened to fit with A&WP as well as connections at Montgomery. Thus commenced through freight and passenger service that prevailed for the duration of West Point Route history.

Postwar years were not kind to either firm. The parent of the Central of Georgia and the Georgia Railroad & Banking Company eventually gained control over A&WP to protect their financial interests in it. In 1870, the Western Rail Road of Alabama took over the M&WP after building from Montgomery west 44 miles to Selma. The combined company did not prosper, though, and was sold under foreclosure in 1875. Once again the CofG and the Georgia banking interests stepped forward. The Central took the branch from Opelika to Columbus into its system, making the A&WP/WofA a single, branchless route from Atlanta through West Point and Montgomery to Selma.

Once again gauge became an issue. During May 29–31, 1886, as part of a mammoth project throughout the South to make tracks uniform nation-

wide, A&WP/WofA rails were narrowed back to the standard gauge of 4 feet 8½ inches. In a convoluted series of ownerships and leases, the A&WP/WofA landed in the Family Lines, which eventually included Louisville & Nashville, Atlantic Coast Line, Charleston & Western Carolina, Clinchfield, and the Georgia Road. The A&WP and WofA would remain in "the Family" until the consolidation of all (including ACL's 1967 merger partner Seaboard Air Line) into Seaboard System in 1983. Although legally separate entities, the A&WP and WofA, beginning with the standard-gauging, operated as a single entity and marketed themselves as "The West Point Route."



J. Parker Lamb

**A blue and silver trio of EMD's, Wofa GP7 525 and F3 501 sandwiching A&WP GP7 574, leans into a curve with westbound time freight 211 at Opelika, Ala., at 3:30 p.m., February 23, 1955.**

**Related, but different**

The West Point Route appeared to many to be an integral partner with the Georgia Railroad, especially since by the 1920s all three were combined in one *Official Guide* entry. Such was not altogether the case, however. The three carriers did share a president-general manager and other joint officers, but on the right-of-way, they were vastly different. While the Georgia was freight-oriented, with just two pairs of heavy-weight passenger trains, the West Point Route had some big-time varnish. Indeed, as late as 1938, total A&WP/WofA train-miles for passenger service significantly exceeded those for freight.

In Atlanta, they did not even share the same passenger facilities, A&WP utilizing Southern's Terminal Station (with Seaboard and Central of Georgia) but Georgia calling a quarter-mile away at Union Station with the L&N; Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis (merged into L&N in 1957); and Atlantic Coast Line (the former Atlanta, Birmingham & Coast). Employees at WofA's Montgomery shops cared for WofA and A&WP locomotives and rolling stock, while Georgia folks did the same work at Augusta, 344 miles away near the Savannah River.

Only in Atlanta did the Georgia and A&WP share a roundhouse, at Hulsey Yard

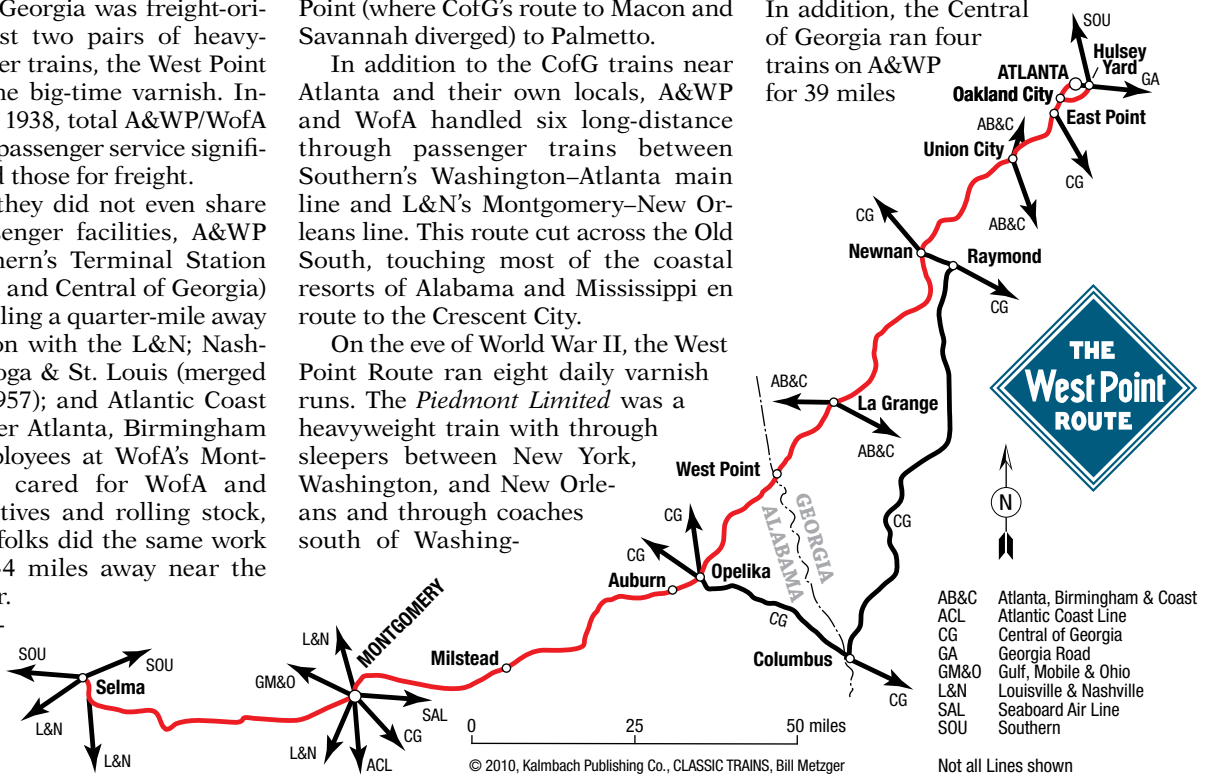
via Atlanta Joint Terminals. The freight connection linking them was a 5-mile belt that joined the yard to A&WP at Oakland Junction, 3 miles south of Terminal Station. A&WP and Central of Georgia shared a double-track main from downtown Atlanta through East Point (where CofG's route to Macon and Savannah diverged) to Palmetto.

In addition to the CofG trains near Atlanta and their own locals, A&WP and WofA handled six long-distance through passenger trains between Southern's Washington-Atlanta main line and L&N's Montgomery-New Orleans line. This route cut across the Old South, touching most of the coastal resorts of Alabama and Mississippi en route to the Crescent City.

On the eve of World War II, the West Point Route ran eight daily varnish runs. The *Piedmont Limited* was a heavyweight train with through sleepers between New York, Washington, and New Orleans and through coaches south of Washing-

ton, as well as a heavy mail-and-express business. The flagship, though, was the *Crescent*, trains 37 and 38, the all-Pullman pride of the Southern Railway between New York, Washington, and Atlanta. South of Atlanta, the West Point added coaches for New Orleans.

In addition, the Central of Georgia ran four trains on A&WP for 39 miles



**This map represents the West Point's connections during World War II, between GM&O's creation and Atlantic Coast Line absorbing the AB&C.**



T. G. King; C. K. Marsh Jr. collection



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**A&WP 678, built in 1951, was the road's only Baldwin S12 model. Ten-Wheeler 261 was rebuilt in '23 from 1906 Rogers slide-valve 4-6-0 260.**

from Atlanta to Newnan, where they diverged east onto Central's Griffin (Ga.)–Chattanooga (Tenn.) line for 6 miles to Raymond and then south on CofG's line to Columbus, Ga., home of the U.S. Army's Fort Benning training center.

The *Crescent* was totally re-equipped with stainless-steel cars built by Budd and Pullman-Standard beginning in 1949 [see pages 46–47]. The West Point's portion of the pool, eight cars, included a baggage car, diner, coaches, sleepers, and a Pullman-lounge-observation car. Pairs of handsome blue-and-silver FP7's replaced equally handsome Pacifics up front. A&WP coach 120 stuck around to

serve on the last Georgia Road mixed that ran into the early 1980s.

Freight business in the 20th century on A&WP/WofA initially focused on on-line farmers and timber merchants. Cotton and cotton products continued to fill boxcars moving to mills at Opelika, Atlanta, and especially West Point. In fact, that community lent its name to a major white goods producer, West Point Manufacturing, which owned the 25-mile Chattahoochee Valley Railway; it originated and terminated valuable traffic for A&WP/WofA.

When coal replaced water power in most of the mills, tonnage was added from L&N origins to sidings all along the West Point Route. Two large stockyards and associated packing houses at Montgomery generated live cattle and fresh meat carloads. In connection with Southern beyond Atlanta, it was said the route offered "one feed service" (at Spencer, N.C.) for live cattle to Jersey City slaughterhouses. Customers at Atlanta and Montgomery generated fertilizer and merchandise, and sand and gravel business grew as road-building and commercial development came.

Eventually West Point's major freight activity was overhead traffic bridged between other Family Lines members at Atlanta (L&N and Georgia, the latter a link to ACL at Augusta) and L&N at Montgomery. The integration showed in trains 208 and 211, through freights with the same numbers on the Georgia and ACL. Chemical traffic from the Gulf Coast destined for downstream processors found the same route from New

Orleans to Atlanta attractive to reach major markets to the east on GA, ACL, and Southern. In a way, the West Point became the Dixie equivalent of the storied Alphabet Route for freight between Chicago and the New York area.

### Odd or even?

Although much of the West Point roads' 20th-century steam locomotive fleet looked like the "Georgian Locomotive" memorialized by H. Stafford Bryant Jr. in his book of the same name—a handsome, elegant group—perhaps the most interesting aspect was not the engines' appearance or the roster's make-up, but the numbering system. All series were three digits, and after 1907, WofA used odd-number lead digits while A&WP took the evens. Thus, WofA Pacific 190 was a sister to A&WP 290, bought from Lima at the same time in 1926 and the epitome of their passenger power. Likewise, the last new steam locomotives purchased, in 1944, were two Mikados of a modernized USRA design, WofA 380 and A&WP 480, slotted above assorted lower-numbered 2-8-2's.

From time to time, power was loaned back and forth between A&WP/WofA and the Georgia, so a conscious effort was made to avoid duplicate numbers among the three to make exchanges operationally seamless. Secondhand locomotives joined the rosters, including three WofA 4-8-2's from Florida East Coast for heavy passenger service; two Detroit Terminal 0-8-0's, A&WP 218 and 219, for the Montgomery yard on WofA; and a single 2-8-0, WofA 120, from Bir-

## WEST POINT FACT FILE

(comparable figures are for 1929 and 1981)

**Route-miles:** AWP, 91, 91; WofA, 133, 133

**Locomotives:** AWP, 24, 11; WofA, 29, 14

**Freight cars:** AWP, 581, 400; WA, 852, 298

**Passenger cars:** AWP, 26, 4\*; WofA, 21, 11\* (\* = figures for 1970)

**Headquarters city:** Atlanta, Ga.

**Special interest group:** Atlantic Coast

Line & Seaboard Air Line Railroads

Historical Society, P.O. Box 4141, Bay

Pines, FL 33744, [www.aclsal.org](http://www.aclsal.org)

**Notable passenger trains:** *Crescent*, *Piedmont Limited*

**Recommended reading:** *Steam Locomotives and History: Georgia Railroad and West Point Route*, by Richard E. Prince (Prince, 1962); *The West Point Route*, by Robert H. "Bob" Hanson (TLC Publishing, 2006)

**Source:** *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000)



David Harris

**Eastbound 208, with dirty black GP's, works across the CofG diamond at Opelika in June 1976.**

mingham Southern. The repair shop at Montgomery also rebuilt five slide-valve 4-6-0's into useful local freight and secondary passenger power in the 1920s.

Aside from eight Baldwin switchers of three models, the West Point Route dieselized during 1948-54 in a manner similar to the Georgia, with a mixture of EMD road types; in fact, EMD references combine all three listings under "Georgia Group." Georgia had the only EMD switchers, NW2's and SW9's in the 900's, and its road units were all 1000's. All WofA and A&WP road power was in the 500's, WofA below 550 and A&WP above. Boiler-equipped WofA 501 was the only F3, while WofA had two FP7's and A&WP four. WofA had GP7's 521-526 and GP9's 530-531, while A&WP had GP7's 571-575. In the later years, some of the early diesels were traded in on GP40 and GP40-2 models or rebuilt into GP16's. Once the blue-and-silver livery was deemed too expensive, the vanilla roster of standard models declined into increasingly drab paint schemes of solid blue, then black, and ultimately, the assimilated "Family Lines System" gray.

The West Point Route had a bit of flash with the streamlined *Crescent* but



C. K. Marsh Jr.

**Family Lines got 51 GP38-2's in 1979: 7 CRR, 2 A&WP, 2 GA, 34 L&N, 1 WofA, and 5 SCL.**

otherwise seemed to stay obscure. Between the end of passenger service on January 7, 1970, and its 1983 merger into Seaboard System, it quietly went about its work and tried to return a profit. It was generally in the black but never a blue-chip property like the coal-hauling Clinchfield or L&N. Cotton has been replaced by paper, plastics, chemicals, and Mobile, Ala., import/export business, but nevertheless, the West Point Route knit key pieces of the "Family" together and today still offers CSX a direct shot between the Gulf chemical coast and New Orleans eastward to routes radiating out of Atlanta. ■