

Georgia & Florida: Class 1 in income only

“Always worn out and just a few steps ahead of the lawyers, bankers, and receivers” • **By C. K. Marsh Jr.**



Moseying northbound into Augusta in 1957 is No. 703, one of six plain-Jane GP7's acquired in 1950. Diesels were beneficial to G&F by being less damaging than steam to its fragile track.

Jim McClellan photo

If there was ever a short line masquerading as a mainline railroad, it was the Georgia & Florida. Aside from its 502-mile length (in 1930) and annually breaking the \$1 million annual revenue threshold to qualify as a Class 1 carrier, the G&F exuded all the characteristics of an entry in Lucius Beebe's classic book *Mixed Train Daily*.

Stretching from Madison, Fla., north across the rural Wiregrass country of southeastern Georgia to Augusta, it managed to avoid or abandon territory that could have provided it a comfortable living. One of its several emblems included the phrase “The Land of Opportunity,” a message that management failed to grasp. An ill-timed latter-day extension into South Carolina only burdened the G&F with unsustainable debt, assuring the carrier a near-perennial place in bankruptcy court.

The genesis of the company was really in Richmond, Va., with the new Seaboard Air Line Railway [Summer 2011 CLASSIC TRAINS]. In the late 19th century, banker John Skelton Williams had assembled the SAL by stitching together the Georgia & Alabama Railway between Savannah and Montgomery with railroads that connected Richmond, Va., to most of the South Atlantic ports, plus key endpoints in Tampa, Atlanta, Mont-

gomery, and River Junction (Chattahoochee), Fla. Williams was in the midst of wealthy financiers who simultaneously were funding the Seaboard, building the Carolina, Clinchfield & Ohio, and developing Virginia coal deposits. In the vicious financial swirl of funding these diverse properties, Williams was ousted as Seaboard president in 1901.

Undaunted, Williams set out to duplicate the Seaboard assembly process on a miniature scale in rural Georgia. Unfortunately, he inadvertently succeeded in duplicating, indeed magnifying, the type of financial problems that beset the SAL until well after World War II.

The Georgia & Florida Railway was incorporated in Georgia on July 7, 1906, “to build, purchase and operate railroad lines in Georgia and Florida,” according to *Moody's Steam Railroads of 1930*. On August 8, 1907, G&F purchased the 30-mile Augusta & Florida; the 53-mile Millen & Southwestern; the 20-mile Atlantic & Gulf Short Line; the 87-mile Douglas, Augusta & Gulf; the 12-mile Nashville & Sparks; and the 28-mile Valdosta Southern. By building four connecting segments totaling 85 miles during 1908–10, Williams formed a continuous route between

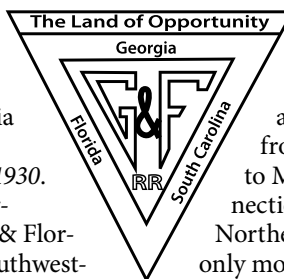
Keysville, Ga., and Madison, Fla. Track-age rights between Keysville and Augusta on a Southern Railway subsidiary, the Augusta Southern, afforded a 250-mile north-south railroad through vast timber and agricultural lands. Alas, the route and several branches failed to touch any big towns except Valdosta.

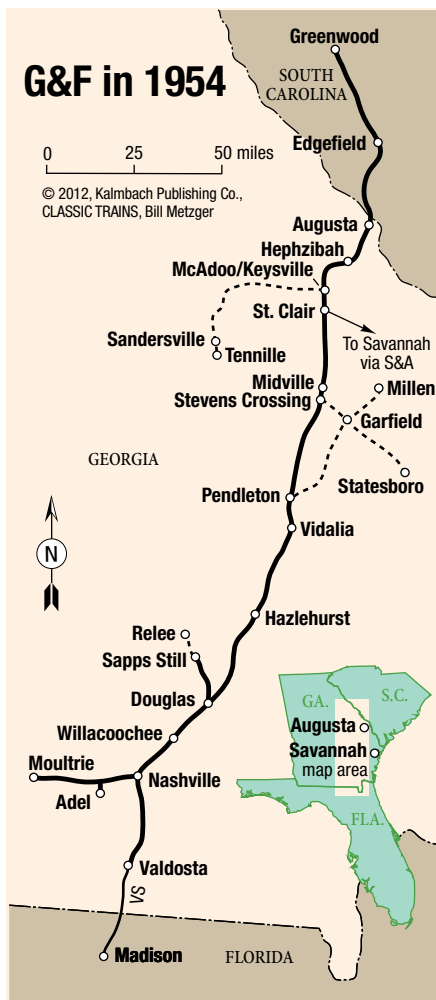
A great deal of effort and expense went into upgrading the amalgamated lines, which in some cases were essentially tram roads. All were built to very light standards. As late as 1939, rail weights of 50 to 80 lbs. (to the yard) predominated. The substructure and ties were equally flimsy, a circumstance that plagued G&F throughout its existence. The fact that its territory received heavy rainfalls, including occasional hurricanes, only aggravated the situation.

Between 1907 and 1915, the new firm went about its business developing traffic along the main line plus four significant branches. Generally, the branches were remnants of purchased lines that weren't used to assemble the “trunk.” The longest were the 43-mile Statesboro line and the 45-mile Millen branch. Together they formed an “X” with mainline connections at Midville and Pendleton. Daily-except-Sunday mixed trains served essentially all the branches. In order of importance, products handled included those of forests, agriculture, and mines (coal, aggregates, clay). Together they made up about two-thirds of G&F tonnage, with exhaustible timber approaching half of the total.

Vidalia sweet onions put their namesake Georgia community on the grocery-store map, but never generated tonnage for the G&F. Efforts to attract seasonal perishables from Florida and south Georgia to Midwestern markets via connections with the Piedmont & Northern and the Clinchfield were only moderately successful, especially in competition with the Atlantic Coast Line's vast network in Florida.

Considerable efforts were exerted to attract carloads to and from connecting railroads, both Class 1 and short lines. The Atlanta, Birmingham & Coast and Savannah & Atlanta were particularly





important connections. Over the years, the percentage of G&F's interchange business gradually improved. On the other hand, passenger service never was significant. During the "Roaring '20s," the road invested in through passenger service, including Pullmans, to connect Augusta with Jacksonville, Fla., via the Southern beyond Valdosta. The onset of the Depression quickly killed this train, named the *Bon Air Special*. A daily mainline local was discontinued on January 15, 1949.

Lurching through receiverships

The financial burden of the organizational debt exceeded the growth of business, forcing the G&F into receivership in March 1915. Although he had surrendered the presidency in 1913, Williams continued to manipulate the financial structure from behind the scenes.

In a rather unusual situation, the bankrupt G&F acquired a controlling interest in the Augusta Southern in 1917, to assure its access to Augusta via the 26



About as "big-time" as the Georgia & Florida could look was this scene at Hephzibah, Ga., in 1947 as doubleheaded Pacifics, No. 502 in the lead, storm south from the Augusta area.

T. Blasingame photo, C. K. Marsh Jr. collection



A loner among G&F diesel switchers, EMC 900 h.p. NW1 No. 91 works in Augusta in 1957.

Jim McClellan photo

miles of trackage rights. Two years later G&F purchased and merged the entire 83-mile Augusta Southern. Williams reappeared as receiver for the G&F in 1921 and devised a reorganization plan that brought the company out of receivership on November 22, 1926. Unfortunately, he died suddenly on November 4, just as things were looking up.

An aggressive plan of expansion went hand-in-glove with the reorganization. To reach more promising connections to "bridge traffic," G&F launched a major extension from Augusta north to Greenwood, S.C., on March 15, 1927. Apparently, management was counting on continuation of the Florida Boom to boost traffic density and help pay for the \$2 million-plus project. Greenwood gave G&F access to Seaboard's Birmingham-Atlanta-Hamlet, N.C., route to and from

the Carolinas, Virginia, and points north of Richmond, Va. Increasing volumes of tobacco could be handled from south Georgia to cigarette manufacturers in Durham, N.C., and Richmond. In addition, the P&N, a heavy-duty 90-mile electric line, connected Spartanburg, S.C., and the Clinchfield Railroad (CC&O) with the G&F at Greenwood.

P&N's tag line, "A Mill to the Mile," gave promise of significant cotton tonnage from south Georgia to the textile belt. Coal moving from Virginia would hopefully flow down the Clinchfield and the P&N to destinations and connections on the extended G&F, including service to Savannah via the Savannah & Atlanta Railway at St. Clair. It was an audacious plan, and ultimately an untimely one. Freight-only operations began on the 58-mile "Greenwood Extension" on



G&F GP7 No. 702 and ex-Southern motor car 81 rest at the Augusta shop in 1957. Geeps 701-704 made it to Southern's roster in 1971, but 705 and 706 went as trade-ins to EMD in 1966.

Jim McClellan photo

June 1, 1929, only five months before the infamous stock market crash.

In October 1929, less than three years after emerging from receivership, G&F again succumbed to court-appointed management. Construction debt and declining freight activity took its toll. This time, it was permanent. Despite the stimulus of World War II traffic and southern industrialization, the line that the 1930 Moody's called "a small, unimportant road" never got on its feet.

Most of the 44-mile agricultural branch from Pendleton to Millen, Ga., was dismantled in 1931. In 1934, the 57-mile former Augusta Southern branch from McAdoo-Keysville to Sandersville-Tennille was abandoned, a decision that proved to be ill-timed. Soon after World War II, rich kaolin mines were opened all around Sandersville, allowing a new short line of the same name to reap daily trainloads of clay. This turned out to be the elusive "Land of Opportunity" for the G&F. Had it been present to share in the boom, kaolin tonnage alone likely

would have sufficed to boost the ill-fated pike out of receivership.

In 1954, the 28-mile segment of the main line into Florida, from Valdosta to Madison, was spun off to short line Valdosta Southern. Finally, on July 1, 1963, Southern Railway, via subsidiaries, bought the G&F for \$7.5 million. A key part of this transaction was to upgrade 22 miles of the Moultrie branch to fashion a mainline bypass around Macon and Atlanta for Midwest-Florida traffic.

Using Southern's Jacksonville-Adel main line and the former G&F branch to reach Moultrie, then tracks of short line Albany & Northern, a connection was made at Albany, Ga., with the Central of Georgia, which had been taken over by the Southern in June 1963 [pages 54-61]. Putting this all together gave the Southern a Birmingham-Jacksonville route, bypassing Atlanta. The entire 318 miles between Adel and Birmingham were upgraded to meet Southern mainline standards, which made the 22 miles of the Moultrie branch far and away the best

track on the entire Georgia & Florida.

Eight years later, Southern merged the Georgia & Florida Railroad into the Central of Georgia. Large segments, including most of the 114 miles from Greenwood, S.C., to Midville, Ga., were abandoned. Yet today, 81 miles of the G&F main line, reduced to idleness, still exist from Vidalia to Midville (36 miles) and south from Willacochee all the way to Valdosta (45 miles).

Power befitting a short line

Consistent with the almost perpetual insolvency of the G&F, its locomotives fit the shortline mold of used, frequently obsolete, and small. The original roster had about 30 assorted lightweight 4-4-0, 4-6-0, and 2-6-0 types from lines assembled into the 1907-10 G&F. Over time, sales of various obsolete engines served to populate the rosters of more than a dozen southeastern shortline and industrial railroads. In its various corporate lives, G&F was able to acquire only eight new steam locomotives, a group of small 72-ton 4-6-0's.

G&F's steam roster became a historian's dream of secondhand power. The financial misfortunes of the Florida East Coast during the Depression provided G&F an opportunity to cheaply acquire 13 light Pacifics and three 0-6-0 switchers, the best steam power it ever owned. These locomotives replaced nine Consolidations acquired via Southern Iron & Equipment from the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh. Several former Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac and Pittsburgh & Lake Erie locomotives, plus an ex-Nickel Plate 0-6-0, served G&F before it standardized on light Pacifics for



Looking like an F3 but upgraded internally by Southern to an F7, G&F 801, at Augusta on June 9, 1962, was built in 1943 as CNO&TP FT No. 6102C (later 6105). G&F GP7 704 works a Central of Georgia job at Millen, Ga., in 1964. Most of G&F's own line to Millen was torn up in 1931.

Both photos, John E. Parker; left from CLASSIC TRAINS collection, right from C. K. Marsh Jr. collection



More typical of the steam-era G&F than a “mainline” doubleheader was this branchline mixed behind 4-6-0 No. 207 at Garfield, Ga., on May 12, 1950. Note the partitioned coach at the rear.

C. K. Marsh Jr. collection

mainline work. A few small Ten-Wheelers served in branchline services almost to the end of the line’s existence. In 1947, G&F obtained three small 4-8-2’s from the just-dieselized Gulf, Mobile & Ohio. Light as they were (137 tons), these were quickly relocated from the worn rail and soft roadbed between Augusta and Valdosta to the shorter but better-built Greenwood Extension.

Except for track improvements, nothing was as beneficial to G&F’s operating department as diesel locomotives. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a holdover agency from the President Herbert Hoover era, came to the G&F’s aid in 1950. RFC loaned the money for nine new EMD’s: three SW1 switchers, Nos. 70–72, and six bare-bones GP7’s, Nos. 701–706, all delivered in an attractive green-and-yellow color scheme. By scrapping every unused asset in sight, including four steam locomotives, the receiver scraped up a down payment.

Business continued to erode, and the Georgia & Florida set aside more and more of its 21 remaining steam locomotives. Finally in 1955, acquisition of two 1937 EMC former Elgin, Joliet & Eastern switchers, 900 h.p. NW1 No. 91 and 600 h.p. SW No. 73 (ex-207 and 400, respectively), plus a Fairbanks-Morse motor car, No. 81 (ex-Southern 41), allowed the G&F to retire all steam. In 1962 the G&F acquired an old F unit from the Southern to help out, but in 1964, after Southern had taken over, the F was traded in to EMD and the genuine odd couple of switchers 81 and 91 were scrapped.

Discounting the eight years of Southern ownership, G&F resided in bankruptcy for four-fifths of its 56-year life. It never got on its feet, despite efforts on

the part of John Skelton Williams, energetic employees, and hands-on receivers. Had it retained the “opportunity” the Augusta Southern afforded and stayed with Augusta as its northern terminus, it might still be with us in some form.

But the hard fact is the Georgia & Florida never filled an economic need, the fate of many a short line. Sweet onions and tobacco were just not enough to support a railroad. The G&F was always worn out and just a few steps ahead of the lawyers, bankers, and receivers. Most remarkable is that G&F eked out a living as long as it did. Mixed trains daily provided color and character but little money, the economic blood of corporate success. ■

Georgia & Florida fact file



(comparative figures are for 1930 and 1961)

Route-miles: 502; 321

Locomotives: 32; 12

Freight cars: 635; 513

Passenger cars: 29; 0

Notable passenger train: *Bon Air Special*

Headquarters city: Augusta, Ga.
Special Interest Group: Southern Railway Historical Association, P.O. Box 1077, Duluth, GA 30096; www.srha.net

Recommended Reading: *Rails Through the Wiregrass*, by H. Roger Grant (Northern Illinois University Press, 2007); *Georgia & Florida Railroad Album*, by Albert M. Langley, Jr. (Union Station, 2004).

Sources: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000) and above titles.