

Savannah & Atlanta: a tale of success

S&A rode a typical “roller coaster,” from timber spur to busy local pike to absorption • By C. K. Marsh Jr.

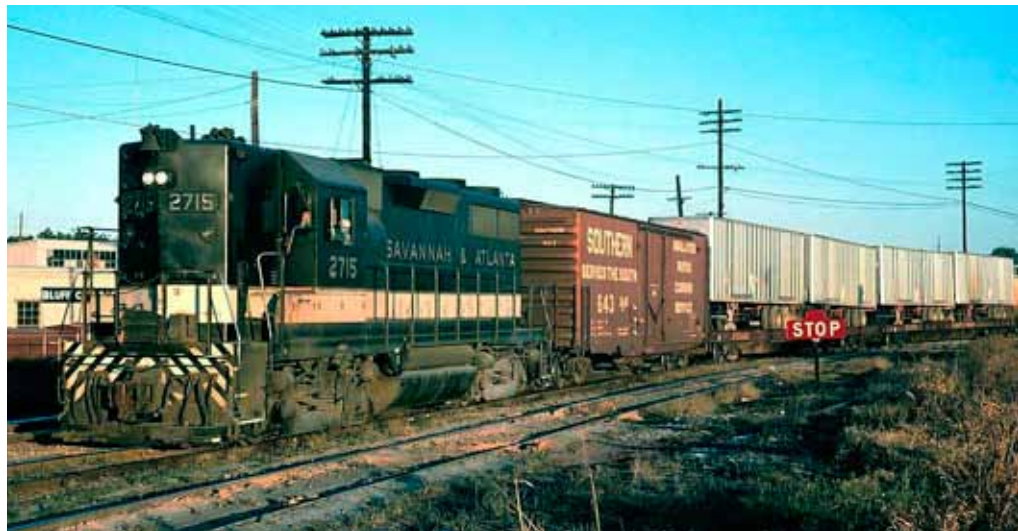
Trees were the genesis of literally hundreds of railroads, and the Savannah & Atlanta was no exception. A lumberman, George M. Brinson, lent his name and money to a railroad charter in March 1906. His plan was to build a feeder line for his Georgia sawmill near the Savannah River a few miles north of its namesake city. By May 1907 he had completed a 25-mile line northwest from Central Junction—the crossing of the Atlantic Coast Line, Seaboard Air Line, Southern Railway, and Central of Georgia near Savannah—to Springfield, Ga. Almost arrow straight, the Brinson Railway traversed large pine and hardwood timber stands in the marshlands parallel to the river.

Crews laid another 19 miles of track to Newington in 1909. More importantly, the advancing Brinson made its first connection with another railroad, the Savannah Valley, which ran 28 miles north to Millhaven, via the established farming community of Sylvania. SV fit nicely into Brinson’s plans to reach more timber and agricultural lands, and he purchased the line on February 18, 1909. Logs now could be loaded and hauled up to 71 miles to the mills near Savannah. Brinson Railway’s six little Ten-Wheelers kept busy hauling the timber.

After a two-year break, construction advanced the railhead another 6 miles, to Sardis. Apparently Brinson’s aggressive expansion had reached the geographic limits of his original charter, but an amendment allowed him to build as far as Waynesboro and Augusta, the latter a major cotton, rail, and trade center. More borrowing financed 18 more miles of track to reach Waynesboro and a CofG connection.

Alas, there was no revenue bonanza in that connection. With its own line from Savannah via Waynesboro to Augusta, there was no reason for CofG to support the newcomer by sharing traffic.

Seeking a more amenable connection, Brinson pushed on a dozen miles to St. Clair and a connection with the Georgia & Florida Railway [“Fallen Flags Remembered,” Spring 2012 CLASSIC TRAINS]. Brinson finally had a friendly



Before being relettered SOUTHERN, S&A GP35 2715 displays the “tuxedo” livery of its latter-day parent, which NS applied in 2012 to a new “Heritage” unit; the 2715 is preserved in Savannah.

Ron Flanary collection

connection to Augusta and beyond, one that also would benefit from reciprocal sales. This sequential expansion, however, had exhausted the financial resources of Brinson’s original backers.

George Brinson’s debt-holders forced him to relinquish control via a bankruptcy filing, and it is at this point the name Charles E. Gay Jr. first appears in the financial records as vice president of the new firm. Appropriately renamed as the Savannah & Northwestern Railway (S&NW), effective March 26, 1914, the road came under the control of New York investment bankers Imbrie & Co. Imbrie, which infused fresh capital into the enterprise to improve facilities and service while lowering operating costs, possessed a railroad that no longer was dependent solely on timber. The carrier still had a serious defect, however—commercially speaking, it was a railroad from somewhere to nowhere.

New addition, new name

Quietly, Imbrie representatives visited the managers of the Georgia Railroad [“Fallen Flags Remembered,” Fall 2009 CLASSIC TRAINS] and its lessee, Atlantic Coast Line. If the S&NW extended its line to a Georgia Road connection, would the Georgia enter into favorable

rate divisions to encourage traffic between Savannah and Atlanta? Yes.

Thus was the Savannah & Atlanta Railway chartered, on December 8, 1915, to build a 33-mile extension to East Warrenton on the Georgia Road. Three miles of trackage rights on the “Macon Road” of the Georgia allowed the new line to jointly use the Camak yard and junction. Thus actions by both parties confirmed a mutually beneficial agreement. Financed with a loan secured by property liens at Port Wentworth, S&A began service July 15, 1916 . . . just in time to benefit from freight destined for the Great War in Europe.

The combined S&A/Georgia route mileage of 265 between Savannah and Atlanta was 10 miles shorter than Central of Georgia’s circuitous and hilly route via Macon. “The Central” finally had an aggressive and worthy competitor between Savannah and the state capital for both freight and passenger traffic. S&A now served the state’s four largest cities by direct connections with either G&F or the Georgia Road.

A through freight operated each day over the entire S&A main line, supplemented by local freights and mixed trains. Through passenger service allowed connections with Georgia Road trains to Macon, Augusta, Athens, and Atlanta. Timber was still important to S&A, though, and Port Wentworth

Lumber Co. trains frequently operated between Millhaven Junction and its mill along the river via trackage rights. The S&A was poised to grow.

On January 1, 1918, S&A leased the tracks of the Port Wentworth Terminal Co. for 99 years. This 2.4-mile branch connected the main line to a large tract of Savannah River waterfront property. Near the original Brinson mills, about 8 miles north of downtown, the land was served exclusively by S&A even though the terminal company had to bridge over the ACL main line to reach it. As a local station on the S&A, all traffic to or from Port Wentworth was afforded line-haul rate divisions rather than the much lower switching charges if interchanged with nearby railroads. The 3,000 acres with deepwater frontage quickly became the site of several major industrial developments. Port Wentworth Lumber Co. and Atlantic Paper & Pulp Corp. were natural destinations for woodland materials. Outbound building materials and paper filled boxcars. By 1920, other firms at Port Wentworth included a shipbuilder, a steamship line, and the lucrative Savannah Sugar Refining Co.

Savannah Sugar was widely marketed under the trademark Dixie Crystals, and sugar quickly became a key business for S&A. Raw sugar, grown by the U.S. Sugar Corp. south of Lake Okeechobee in South Florida, was harvested in the winter months. Initially processed at Clewiston, the sugar was loaded into trains of 50-ton boxcars and routed north via either ACL (Savannah) to S&A or ACL (Lake Harbor)–Florida East Coast (Jacksonville)–ACL (Savannah)–S&A. (This traffic and the unusual routing was divided between ACL and FEC based on the origin stations near the lake.) The Savannah refinery could unload 27 cars at a time. S&A switch engines worked 24 hours a day during the season to handle the loaded cars and resulting empties to and from the ACL less than 6 miles away.

Alas, the growing business on the S&A could not forestall a post-World War I recession and receivership. Deterioration of the original roadbed and ties across the swampy woodlands, as far north as Sylvania, contributed to the financial stress. It took 18 years, until January 1, 1939, and the aid of a \$1.3 million Reconstruction Finance Corp. loan, for the new Savannah & Atlanta Railway to organize.

Following the reorganization, the Port



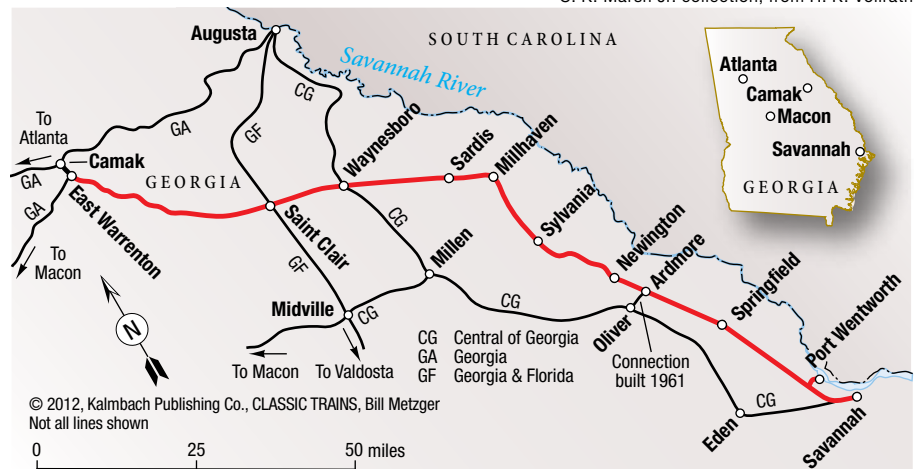
S&A 503, a 1923 Baldwin 2-8-2, leaves Sylvania with mixed 102, trailing a Jim Crow combine.

M. B. Cooke



Action photos of S&A's five ex-Ontario & Western 4-8-2s are hard to find because the engines normally handled night freights. No. 445, ex-O&W 401, poses at Camak, Ga., in February 1947.

C. K. Marsh Jr. collection, from H. K. Vollrath





Oval-grille 1940 VO's 22 (1,000 h.p., above), ex-CofG 22, and 660 h.p. CofG 5 (behind S&A DRS-6-4-1500 107), rest in Savannah on Christmas 1962.

Two photos, Norm Herbert

Wentworth Corp. owned the S&A. Just in time for World War II, new owner Piedmont Associates, Inc., took control of both Port Wentworth and the S&A. Business boomed. Charles E. Gay Jr. was president, working for a board of directors chaired by Robert M. Nelson of New York. Nelson was a hands-on chairman who kept close tabs and a personal interest in the company and its employees.

Steam: eclectic, short-lived

As the traffic generated at Port Wentworth grew, the small fleet of ex-Brinson 4-6-0s gave way to an eclectic locomotive roster. Seven 2-8-2s started arriving in 1919; two were diversions from Cuba. In 1936, fire-sale prices on FEC light Pacifics brought three north for service on the Savannah-Waynesboro mixed; FEC 80, 141, and 136 became S&A 750-752. After the war, S&A found five Yankee 4-8-2s on the rapidly dieselizing New York, Ontario & Western: 401, 404, 406, 407, and 409. The S&A made them its 445-449 series.

These Mountain types handled fast freights 211 and 212 over the main line. Northbound 211 moved perishables brought up from Florida by ACL, as well as refined sugar, lumber, paper, and other traffic generated and/or terminated around Savannah. In fact, the numbers for these 50- to 70-car trains were the same on ACL and Georgia Road, as well. On the S&A, the 4-8-2s took coal and water at Sardis and worked the G&F interchange at St. Clair, otherwise stopping just to meet their opposite number. They frequently ran with extra sections. The nocturnal schedules on S&A precluded daylight photos in most instances, so images of these grand 4-8-2s in full stride are rare. Plus, they didn't last long.

Just two years later, in 1948, diesels came in the form of eight dark green Baldwin DRS-6-4-1500 road-switchers (1,500 h.p., A1A trucks for S&A's light rail), sweeping the Mountains and most of the remaining steam power into local scrap yards. An ex-CofG Baldwin VO-1000 switcher took over some of the yard work around Savannah. Three AS-416 road-switchers arrived during 1950-55, retiring all but one steam locomotive. Originally kept for sentimental reasons, Pacific 750 on July 4, 1962, was conveyed to the Atlanta Chapter, National Railway Historical Society, for preservation and excursion service. Three of the 2-8-2s made their way to West Virginia for service on the Elk River Coal & Lumber as Nos. 15-17, and several of the older Ten-Wheelers earlier had been sold to various short lines in the South.

For decades the Central of Georgia, headquartered in Savannah, had lusted after the lucrative Port Wentworth traffic of its parallel rival. On weekdays, as many as 20 S&A crews went to work every 24 hours. It was a busy railroad. After repeated overtures Robert Nelson finally agreed to sell the S&A to the CofG, provided the Central would continue to operate it independently with the existing president (Charles E. Gay III), management, and employees. The deal was effective August 22, 1951. For 10 years the S&A continued to operate as usual, with only a gradual shift of traffic away from the Camak and St. Clair interchanges toward the CofG connection at Waynesboro and long hauls to Atlanta and beyond via Macon. The long-standing mixed-train schedules with their Jim Crow combines between Savannah and Waynesboro ended, but local freights continued to service single-car accounts.

After a decade, the 1951 agreement collapsed, a casualty of railroad consolidations and line retrenchments. In 1961 CofG gained regulatory permission to abandon its 42-mile main line from suburban Savannah to Oliver and run over the more direct S&A via a connection at Ardmore. A later management study of S&A brought attention to its lack of on-line business north of Sylvania to beyond Sardis. By using the nearby CofG main line and a part of the branch to Augusta as far as Waynesboro, 39 miles of S&A were retired. Meanwhile, traffic to and from Camak and the Georgia Road was steadily diminishing as CofG solicitation diverted more of it to Central routes.

In 1964, Southern Railway bought the CofG along with its various controlled connections, including the S&A. Quickly, Southern invested in its new property around Savannah. Just north of Central Junction, Southern built a large new yard on the site of the S&A facilities. Southern also abandoned the adjacent CofG yard along with other duplicate facilities, plus a small Southern yard nearby. The single-line monopoly at Port Wentworth now benefited the Southern. The last investment in S&A equipment was 11 GP35's, Nos. 2705-2715, delivered in early 1966 in Southern livery (and with high noses and Alco trucks) but lettered Savannah & Atlanta, to replace all the Baldwins. (No. 2715 is displayed at Savannah's Roundhouse Railroad Museum). In 1975, S&A was merged into the Central of Georgia, ending Gay family involvement in the railroad business.

The S&A had ridden a not atypical roller coaster from isolated timber spur to expanding short line to regional participant with neighboring roads to absorption by a parallel rival to disappear-



S&A Pacific 750, given to an NRHS chapter on July 4, 1962 (above), today is an exhibit at the Southeastern Railroad Museum in Duluth, Ga.

James W. Bogle

ance into a growing large system. And although another flag had fallen, and a small one at that, today it is remembered more than most because of the one 4-6-2 that was saved. Southern used the engine occasionally during its steam-excursion program of the 1960s and '70s, and the large, red "S&A" emblem on No. 750's tender perpetuated the memory of a 142-mile road. Moreover, the emblem made enough of an impression, apparently, that although the GP35's lacked heralds, when Southern successor Norfolk Southern Corp. in 2012 included new EMD SD70ACe 1065 among its 20 "Heritage" locomotives, painted in Southern black-and-white but lettered SAVANNAH & ATLANTA, the big brute was adorned with a red "S&A" emblem on its nose! ■

Savannah & Atlanta fact file



(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1969)

Route-Miles: 142; 167

Locomotives: 13; 11

Freight cars: 58; 781

Passenger cars: 7; 0

Headquarters city: Savannah, Ga.

Special interest group: Central of Georgia Railway Historical Society, 2400 Pleasant View Road, Pleasant View, TN 37146; www.cofg.org

Recommended reading: *Central of Georgia and Connecting Lines*, by Richard E. Prince (Prince, 1976).

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