

The colorful, fast Seaboard Air Line

Passengers came first, but named freights revealed SAL's marketing acumen



Jim McClellan

On SAL's *Silver Meteor*, crossing the Trout River approaching Jacksonville, Fla., in 1964, coaches and a tavern-observation brought up the rear.

The Seaboard Air Line Railroad's beginnings date to 1832, when the Portsmouth & Roanoke was chartered to build from Portsmouth, Va., to Weldon, N.C. Opened in 1834, the line was to compete with the Petersburg Railroad, Atlantic Coast Line's earliest predecessor, which ran to Weldon from Petersburg, Va. The companies' backers saw great potential to link the North with the South's bountiful agricultural and forest products and with its slowly but steadily developing potential for industry. P&R became the Seaboard & Roanoke, which—after the setbacks of the Civil War—began acquiring other lines and building trackage further into the Carolinas. The S&R and its associated roads began calling themselves the Seaboard Air Line system, and by 1895 had reached Atlanta, Ga.

The "Air Line" name was often used by railroads of the period to denote a route supposedly "as straight as the crow flies." It was a reasonably direct run from Portsmouth to Weldon, but the Air Line label would be more than hype when in the 1880s Seaboard acquired a line linking Hamlet and Wilmington, N.C., which included a 79-mile tangent track, longest in the U.S. (and still run by CSX). Moreover, Seaboard tried to start a real airline, Seaboard Airways, in the early 1940s, but the Civil Aeronautics Board denied it.

As the 19th century closed, the SAL system came under control of a group led by John Skelton Williams, who added a line from Richmond, Va., to Weldon, and acquired the Florida Central & Peninsular, transforming what had

been a Portsmouth–Atlanta carrier into a north-south line. In 1900, the various SAL roads were incorporated as Seaboard Air Line Railway. Thus was the core route structure in place, with its coastal main line from Richmond going through Raleigh, Columbia, and Savannah to Jacksonville and Tampa.

Other important lines ran from Monroe to Rutherfordton, N.C. (which later connected to the Clinchfield); from Savannah west to Montgomery, Ala.; and from Jacksonville to Chattahoochee, Fla., and a connection with Louisville & Nashville on to Mobile, Ala., and New Orleans. The early route map was completed by branches in the Carolinas and Florida. Seaboard also controlled the Baltimore Steam Packet Co., known as the Old Bay Line, which operated in the Chesapeake Bay area until 1962.

The Atlanta line was extended to Birmingham in 1904, adding traffic and securing its place as second-busiest after the north-south main. Hamlet, as the axis for SAL's east-west and north-south traffic patterns, was the site of a large yard and shops; its iconic passenger station stands today as a railroad museum and Amtrak stop. Other key shops were at Portsmouth, Savannah, Jacksonville ["Bird's-Eye View," Spring 2011 CLASSIC TRAINS], and Tampa.

Seaboard emphasized passenger service from its earliest days. Old lithographs show the *Atlanta Special*, linking that city and Washington, D.C. (via the RF&P north of Richmond, of course), with the label "76 miles in 67 minutes" highlighting a particularly fast segment of its run. As soon as SAL expanded to

Florida, it promoted travel there via such trains as the *Florida-Cuba Special* and the seasonal *Seaboard Florida Limited*, both forwarded to Miami over the Florida East Coast. Early freights often carried produce from Florida as well as phosphate rock mined from the "Bone Valley" area near Tampa.

Further expansion

SAL continued to expand, in 1917 adding a low-grade freight line between Hamlet and Savannah via Charleston, S.C. A fresh burst of construction and acquisitions in the 1920s added significant mileage, notably through south central Florida to Miami in 1927. This allowed SAL to claim itself the only railroad serving both Florida coasts and ended its dependence on FEC. In 1925, SAL leased the Charlotte Harbor & Northern, an important phosphate hauler on Florida's west coast. In 1928, Seaboard acquired the Georgia, Florida & Alabama, opening a shortcut from Florida to the Montgomery line to speed important freight connections to the Midwest. SAL also controlled short lines including the 92-mile Macon, Dublin & Savannah in Georgia and the 35-mile Tavares & Gulf in Florida.

The Miami extension was accompanied by inauguration of the *Orange Blossom Special*, an all-Pullman, winter-only luxury flyer that soon gained national fame. Seaboard spared no expense in publicizing the elegant train, advertising it on boxcars, and the "Blossom" even had a popular bluegrass song written about it in the late '30s. The Blossom was a fitting symbol of

Seaboard's early fortunes, but the good times didn't last. The debt load from all the decade's enthusiastic expansion couldn't withstand the collapse of the Florida boom and the onset of the Depression, and SAL was forced into bankruptcy in 1930.

Although the '30s were lean times, SAL's receivers believed attractive investments might be just what it needed to bring back business. The railroad's interest in streamlining and diesels led to semi-streamlined rail motor cars and semi-lightweight "American Flyer" coaches in the mid-1930s and to Electro-Motive E4's for the *Orange Blossom Special* in December '38. Three months later Seaboard unveiled a new lightweight streamliner, the seven-car New York-Miami *Silver Meteor*. It was an immediate sensation, and SAL quickly went back to EMD and Budd for more equipment; by 1941, the railroad was running daily 14-car trains to both Miami and Tampa/St. Petersburg.

While the war years strained SAL's resources—and inflicted several deadly wrecks on its single-track route—the railroad shouldered the load with new EMD FT's, secondhand steam engines from Western Maryland and Chicago & North Western, and installation of block signals and centralized traffic control over large portions of its main line. Wartime income helped the carrier emerge from receivership in August 1946 as Seaboard Air Line Railroad.

The high-profile wrecks, many involving passenger trains, spurred quick postwar completion of the signaling and modernization campaign. SAL's earliest CTC installation—the first in the Southeast—had started south from Richmond in late 1941. By the early '50s, signals covered most mainline mileage, keeping the operation fluid and competitive with its double-tracked neighbor ACL. Seaboard even considered cab signaling briefly in the late '40s but never implemented it.

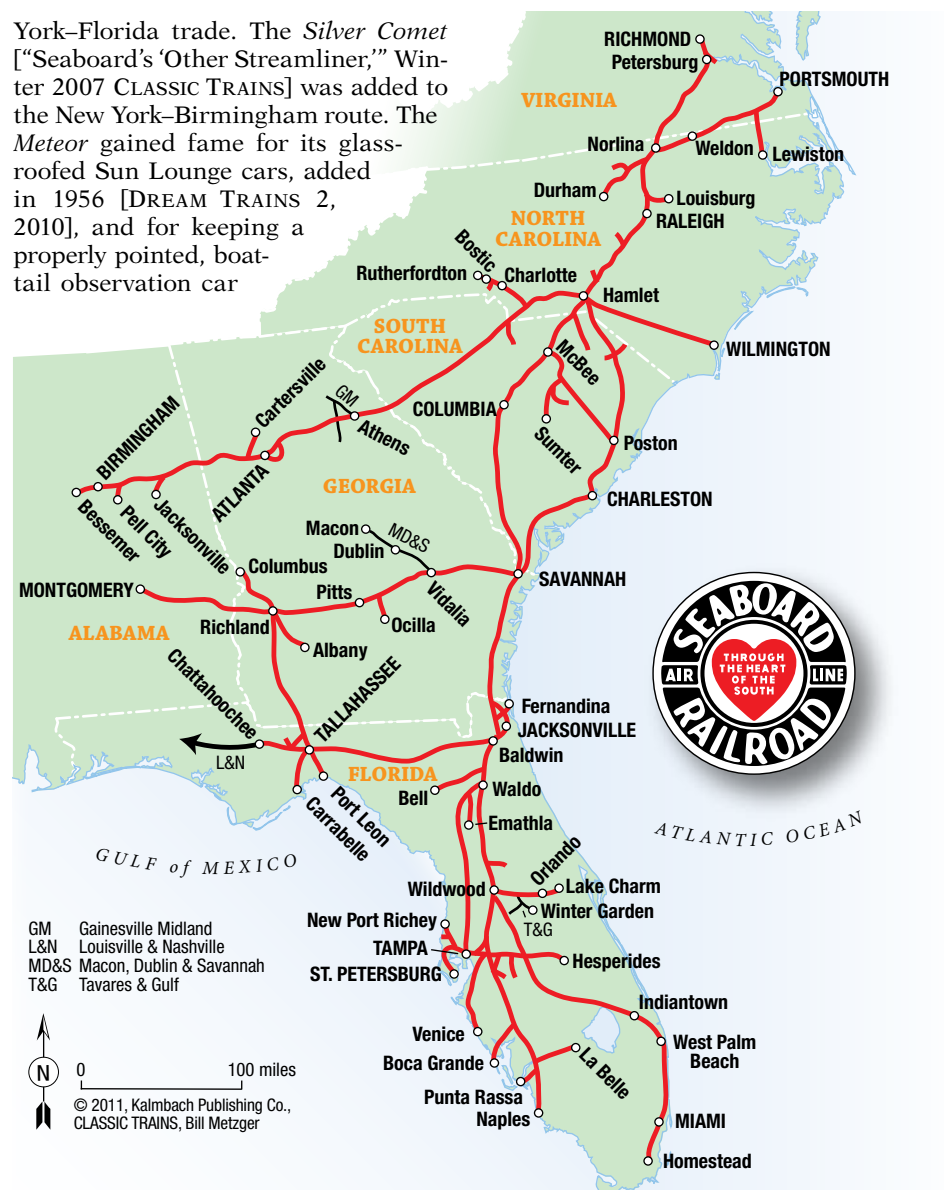
In the postwar traffic glow, Seaboard rapidly added more streamlined cars from Budd in 1947 and lightweight sleepers from several builders beginning in '49. The *Silver Star* name was given to what had been a second section of the *Meteor*, and the two "Silver Fleet" members held down the first-class New



W. B. Cox, Krambles-Peterson Archive

Seaboard's E units, FT's, and Baldwin cabs wore this early "citrus" scheme, displayed by E7 3036 in March 1952 as the northbound *Silver Meteor* loads passengers at St. Petersburg, Fla.

York-Florida trade. The *Silver Comet* ["Seaboard's 'Other Streamliner,'" Winter 2007 CLASSIC TRAINS] was added to the New York-Birmingham route. The *Meteor* gained fame for its glass-roofed Sun Lounge cars, added in 1956 [DREAM TRAINS 2, 2010], and for keeping a properly pointed, boat-tail observation car





G. W. Pettingill, courtesy Larry Goolsby

Note the “flagship” blurb on the water tank at Wildwood, Fla., a train that 1925 Baldwin M-2 class Mountain type 261 often pulled. SAL rebuilt her with a feedwater heater and new tender.



Jim McClellan

SAL’s diesel color variety is evident in this 1959 lineup at Richmond, Va. This off-white (really green) replaced the E8’s citrus colors; the GP7 is in freight livery and Baldwin the yard scheme.

on the rear throughout the train’s pre-Amtrak existence. Seaboard continued to maintain its premier trains to high standards into the ‘60s, proudly calling itself “The Route of Courteous Service.” The *Meteor* and *Star* names survive on Amtrak’s New York–Miami route.

Variety in locomotives

Postwar modernization also came fast to SAL’s engine fleet, dominated by steam into the late ‘40s. After the 1938–41 E-unit purchases, Seaboard sampled switchers from EMD, Alco, and Baldwin, and also tried exotic Baldwin road units, including 14 big “Centipedes” for freight and 3 “baby-face” DR6-4-1500’s for light passenger runs. SAL’s early road diesels wore the colorful “citrus” livery of green, yellow, and orange, in

later years supplanted by more utilitarian green-based liveries. Seaboard always maintained a separate red-and-black scheme for diesel switchers.

Seaboard’s steam roster had several distinctive classes. More than 100 Q-3 Mikados, easily spotted by their face full of air pumps, formed the backbone of the freight fleet. Far sleeker were the M-2 Mountains, which pulled the top passenger runs from their delivery in 1924–26 until the E units took over.

The railroad had articulated locomotives on two occasions. It bought 15 2-8-8-2 Mallets in 1918 to help move heavy World War I traffic, but promptly sold them to Baltimore & Ohio in 1920. SAL’s second, and more successful, foray came in 1935 with the purchase of five 2-6-6-4 single-expansion locomo-

tives for fast freight service. With 69-inch drivers, they were among the first high-speed articulateds in the country [see page 74]. Seaboard bought five more in 1937 but sold all 10 to B&O in 1947 as diesels were coming. The steam stable was filled out with Decapods, Ten-Wheelers, and Pacifics. SAL streamlined three of the 4-6-2’s just before the war for the west coast section of the *Meteor* and dressed them in a modified version of the citrus scheme.


Dieselization was essentially done by 1953, though a lone 0-4-0T stayed active until 1958 on industrial track at Columbus, Ga. [page 99, Spring 2010 CT]. After its FT’s and handfuls of EMD F3A’s and Alco FA1-FB1’s just after the war, SAL stayed with hood units for freight service, winding up with hundreds of EMD GP and Alco RS road-switchers. In the 1960s, SAL purchased a sizeable fleet of four-axle EMD and Alco units, and also bought 20 dual-service SDP35’s for secondary passenger runs but painted in the freight scheme.

SAL absorbed two lines in the 1950s, the first being subsidiary MD&S in ‘57. Then in 1959 Seaboard briefly became a steam owner again when it bought the 41-mile Gainesville Midland in Georgia. (SAL dieselized the GM right away, and later assigned a GM-lettered, SAL-liveried SD40.) SAL also controlled (but never merged) the Tavares & Gulf in Florida, a short but valuable enterprise whose Winter Garden station once originated the most perishable loadings of any point on the system.

Seaboard jumped vigorously into the early 1960s trend to fast intermodal trains and was noted for its southbound TT-23, often headed by multiple E units and rated the fastest scheduled freight in the U.S. in 1963-64. The time freights were given marketing labels including *Marketer*, *Capital*, and *Merchandiser*. Phosphate, forest products, and merchandise joined the new piggyback and auto-rack traffic as mainstays of SAL’s brisk freight business. In the ‘60s, Seaboard also went after freight with aggressive advertising and thousands of new cars, including a fleet of bright green cushion underframe boxcars.

SAL began merger talks with longtime rival ACL in 1958. The companies were doing well enough on their own,

but both knew their similar route maps serving many of the same cities, often on nearly parallel lines, would not fare well under intensifying truck, pipeline, and airline competition. Seaboard President John W. Smith planned the move with Coast Line President W. Thomas Rice, and intense detailed planning for the combined company was soon under way. The Interstate Commerce Commission blessed the union in 1963, but court challenges—largely from neighboring railroads—held off the new Seaboard Coast Line until July 1, 1967.

SAL's colorful diesels, classy passenger trains, bold boxcar slogans, and gritty determination in the face of bigger competitors naturally endeared it to a loyal group of fans and customers. Some of the South's most noted photographers and authors have claimed Seaboard as their favorite, including the late Wiley Bryan, David Salter, and Arthur Waldrop. More recently William E. Griffin Jr. and Paul Faulk are among those who have written multiple books on SAL. Many former employees, such as Waldrop, never felt their railroad careers were as satisfactory after being absorbed by SCL. They often spoke of a family atmosphere during the Seaboard years that was lost in the merger. 

SEABOARD FACT FILE

Comparative figures are for 1929 and 1965

Route-miles: 4,501; 4,123

Locomotives: 726; 557

Freight cars: 23,531; 27,613

Passenger cars: 490; 490 (correct)

Headquarters city: Portsmouth, Va.;
Richmond, Va.

Special interest group: Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Line Railroads Historical Society, P.O. Box 551371, Jacksonville, FL 32255-1371; www.aclsal.org.

Notable passenger trains: *Orange Blossom Special*; *Silver Meteor*, *Star*, and *Comet*

Recommended reading: *Through the Heart of the South*, by Robert Wayne Johnson (Boston Mills Press, 1995); *Seaboard Air Line in Color, Volume 1: Motive Power and Memories*, by Paul Faulk (Morning Sun Books, 2009); *Seaboard Air Line Passenger Service—The Streamlined Era*, by Larry Goolsby (TLC Publishing, 2011).

Source: Author's materials.