

# Central of Georgia—‘The Right Way’

Of Savannah origins, the railroad first became, as it expanded, “A hand full of strong lines” • By Allen Tuten



Columbus, Ga., 1960, from left: E7 810 in the later green, in off the *Man O' War*; E8's 812/811 from the *Seminole*, to be relieved by 808's duo.

Howard Robins photo, CGRHS collection

The builders of the Central of Georgia Railway's earliest predecessor lines, beginning in my hometown of Savannah, could not have imagined that their railroad would eventually extend across Georgia into Alabama, barely into Tennessee, and, briefly, just inside Florida. But they persisted in assembling smaller roads into “A Hand Full of Strong Lines,” a slogan used on early public timetables depicted by an outstretched hand, with prominent cities in the palm and fingers, and Savannah at the wrist.

The city's location on the Savannah River about 20 miles from the Atlantic

Ocean had provided it with a prosperous port since 1733. The river, navigable as far north as Augusta, Ga., was used for freight, mostly cotton, to travel to the Port of Savannah for shipment abroad.

A century later, in 1833, construction of the South Carolina Canal & Railroad Co. between Hamburg, S.C. (across the Savannah River from Augusta), and Charleston, S.C., caused concern among Savannah's leaders. Worried that the new railroad would divert traffic, they sought to build their own. On December 20, 1833, the Central Rail Road & Canal Co. of Georgia was chartered to build a railroad or canal from Savannah west to

the Ocmulgee River at Macon, and the first rails were laid at Savannah in December 1835 amid great fanfare. Just as construction began, the charter was amended to allow banking privileges, and the company's name was changed to the Central Rail Road & Banking Co. of Georgia.

The specific route to Macon caused disagreement, with some wanting a more direct “southern” route, and others preferring a less direct “northern” route, which was better from an engineering standpoint. Management eventually chose the latter, in part owing to plantations in the region from which slave labor could be obtained for construction, and from which shipments of cotton would be made. The selection of this route likely was the inspiration for the railroad's later slogan, “The Right Way.”

The company had financial problems and labor issues, but construction continued, reaching the east bank of the Ocmulgee, across from Macon and 190 miles from Savannah, in October 1843. At that time, the Central Rail Road was thought to be the longest railroad in the world under single ownership.

With the line in operation, expansion continued across Georgia through construction of new lines and the lease or purchase of existing companies. Access to Atlanta came through the Macon & Western Railroad, while the South West-



A typical late '40s publicity shot has two of CofG's nine F3A's, wearing the original blue, gray, and black, rolling along on lightly ballasted track amidst lush foliage with kudzu encroaching.

Central of Georgia photo, CGRHS collection

ern Railroad built a line from Macon to Albany, Ga., and crossed into Alabama at Eufaula, on the west bank of the Chattahoochee River. Columbus, also on the Chattahoochee, was reached by a connection to the South Western Railroad.

Near the end of the War Between the States, the main stem of the Central between Macon and Savannah received significant damage from Gen. William T. Sherman's troops on their March to the Sea.

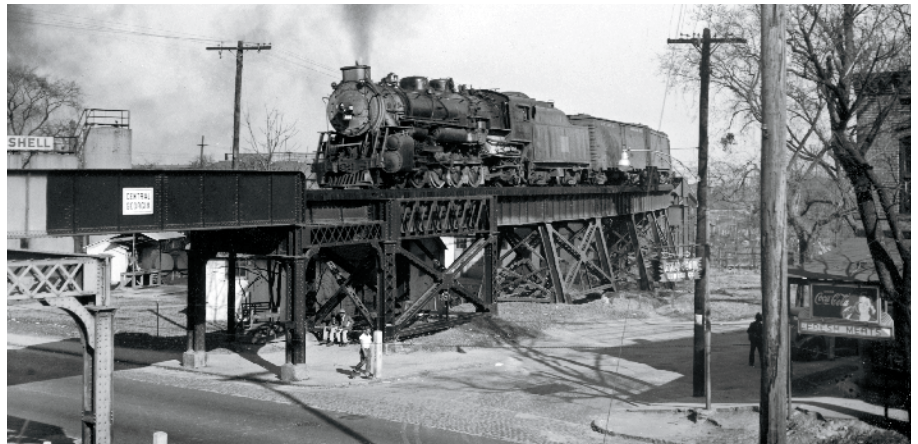
The wartime blockade on Savannah had stopped all port activities and limited further development. That changed in 1872 when Central Rail Road President William M. Wadley purchased the Vale Royal Plantation, 273 acres of riverfront property on the Savannah River just north of the city, where docks, warehouses, railroad yards, and industries were built. Two years later, the Ocean Steamship Co. was formed as a Central Rail Road subsidiary. Its initial fleet of six ships allowed the railroad to reduce dependency on private ship owners to get products to northern ports.

With the "hand full of strong lines" stretching across central Georgia, management turned attention to Alabama, purchasing a line to Montgomery in 1879. Birmingham was reached in 1888 via the Columbus & Western, which had two tunnels just east of Birmingham. One of those, Oak Mountain Tunnel, is thought by some to be the site of John Henry's legendary competition with a steam drill.

### "Familiar" CofG: born 1895

In 1888, the Central Rail Road came under control of the Richmond & West Point Terminal Railway & Warehouse Co. That firm's financial dealings and the resulting lawsuits sent the Central Rail Road into receivership, but also removed it from control of the giant Richmond Terminal Co. On November 1, 1895, the Central of Georgia Railway (until the end, just "the Central" to many) emerged as a new, independent company.

During and shortly after the reorganization, several smaller railroads, some of which had been subsidiaries, were absorbed into the "new" CofG, including the Chattanooga, Rome & Southern, which extended the system to its northernmost point at Chattanooga, Tenn. CR&S built south to Carrollton, Ga., and the Savannah, Griffin & North Alabama built from Griffin north to Carrollton,



Mountain 490 (Richmond, 1920), one of 32 CofG 4-8-2s, heads out of Macon Terminal Station toward Atlanta on March 5, 1949, with the five-railroad Jacksonville–Chicago *Dixie Limited*.

Photographer unknown, CGRHS collection



resulting in a 200-mile branch off the CofG's Atlanta–Macon main line.

The Central barely reached not only into Tennessee but also Florida. Its line from Columbia, Ala., west to Dothan was built by the Chattahoochee & Gulf, and a branch extended the route to Lockhart, Ala., next to the Florida border, in 1904. Soon 2-mile spurs from Lockhart reached to Paxton and Lakewood Fla., but they were gone before

World War II. CofG's zenith in mileage is believed to be 1,944, around 1930.

In east-central Georgia, CofG controlled several railroads which were often referred to as the "Central Short Lines": Wrightsville & Tennille, Wadley Southern, Louisville & Wadley, and Sylva Central. They often shared equipment, much of it hand-me-downs from the CofG, and the "down home" operations with aging steam locomotives and



Officials pose with CofG's best-known "off-line calling card" of the 1950s, 50-foot PS-1 boxcars painted black with a big aluminum oval, nicknamed "blimp" or "football."

Central of Georgia photo, CGRHS collection

wooden combines on mixed trains, often run daily except Sunday, became popular with railfans.

### In Illinois Central's camp

IC acquired CofG control in 1909 through purchase of stock from E. H. Harriman, although the Central was operated as a separate company with its own facilities, operations, and administrative offices. IC opened a route from Jackson, Tenn., to Birmingham via trackage rights and new construction, to connect with the CofG. It was during IC's ownership that several Midwest-to-Florida passenger trains, including the *Seminole*, began operating over CofG.

Central of Georgia entered receivership in 1932, which continued until 1948 when it was reorganized, no longer controlled by the IC.

The Savannah & Atlanta Railway, which ran from Savannah northwest to a connection with the Georgia Road at Camak, Ga., was purchased in 1951 ["Fallen Flags Remembered," Winter 2012 CLASSIC TRAINS]. CofG operated S&A as a separate company, though they consolidated 70 miles of nearly parallel mainline trackage out of Savannah (about half each CofG and S&A) in 1962.

In the mid-1950s, the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway (Frisco) began buying CofG stock, soon acquiring a majority ownership, but without ICC approval. Ultimately, the ICC ruled against Frisco and ordered it to sell its CofG stock.

Southern Railway acquired that stock and exercised control on June 17, 1963.

### Cotton, fruit, and coal

CofG enjoyed a variety of freight traffic, much of it agricultural owing to the moderate climate and favorable growing conditions. Cotton, the original commodity, was shipped from middle and south Georgia to Savannah and loaded onto ships bound for northern mills. Orchards around Fort Valley were served by seasonal sidings, with blocks of Fruit Growers Express refrigerator cars taking peaches to northern cities. Other fruits and vegetables not requiring refrigerated transport were shipped in Central's vast fleet of ventilated boxcars.

The availability of timber resources, mainly southern yellow pine, contributed to the growth of the paper industry in the Southeast. On-line mills at Savannah, Macon, Rome, Coosa Pines (40 miles east of Birmingham), and near Augusta, received pulpwood racks and wood-chip cars from area woodyards, with finished paper products shipped out in boxcars. Coal was mined near Birmingham and Chickamauga, with much of it used by CofG for locomotive fuel or sent to Savannah as fuel for steamships.

Central of Georgia was basically an east-west road, with the predominant route being between Birmingham and Savannah via Columbus and Macon, 440 miles. Most CofG freight traffic was to or from Savannah. Operationally, traffic

heading away from Savannah was considered westbound, with odd-numbered trains, while traffic moving toward Savannah was considered eastbound, with even-numbered trains.

### Big Apples and varnish

When the Central of Georgia was organized in 1895, it had 214 steam locomotives of the 4-4-0, 4-6-0, and 2-6-0 types. The roster was expanded in the early 1900s with 2-8-0s, 2-8-2s, 2-10-2s, 4-6-2s, 4-8-2s, and, briefly, 2-6-6-2s. Many of these acquisitions were during Illinois Central control, and many of CofG's new locomotives were based on IC designs, or acquired from the IC.

The Central's only modern steam engines were eight Lima 4-8-4s, Nos. 451-458, received in 1943 and used in both passenger and fast freight service. Designated the K class, they were nicknamed "Big Apples," but would have only a 10-year life, as all were retired in July 1953.

Dieselization began in 1939 with the arrival of SW1 No. 1, which was joined by about 40 more switchers from EMD, Alco, Baldwin, and Fairbanks-Morse.

Diesels for mainline use began arriving in 1946 when eight E7A's replaced steam on through passenger trains. In 1947, two intra-line streamliners were added, *Nancy Hanks II* between Savannah and Atlanta [Spring 2012 CLASSIC TRAINS], and the *Man O' War* between Columbus and Atlanta. To help with these, two more E7A's came in 1948, along with two E8A's in 1950, Nos. 811 and 812, which were used in pool service with Illinois Central on the *Seminole*. The E8's, like the E7's, came in CofG's distinctive blue, gray, and black scheme with orange trim, but later were painted in IC's brown and orange, although they kept Central of Georgia lettering. In later



CofG RS3 119 hostiles Southern's office car 6 at Augusta Union Station in June 1966.

Jerry A. Pinkpank; J. David Ingles collection



Displaying the pre-Southern look of CofG yard diesels is S12 No. 311, one of 10 Baldwins of 4 models, at Columbus, Ga., in November 1960.

Norm Herbert; J. David Ingles collection



Central's penultimate group of new diesels was five GP35's, 210–214, delivered in December 1963. The 213 posed at Augusta in March 1966.

Jerry A. Pinkepank; J. David Ingles collection

years they could be found on virtually any IC train, being spotted as far from the *Seminole* route as St. Louis, Mo., and Sioux City, Iowa!

CofG also operated IC's streamliner *City of Miami* between Birmingham and Albany and two trains between Atlanta and Albany, linking the Louisville & Nashville and Atlantic Coast Line: the Cincinnati–Miami *Flamingo* and the Cincinnati–Florida Gulf Coast *Southland*. For a time, a through Atlanta–Panama City (Fla.) Pullman was operated via Dothan, Ala., in conjunction with the Atlanta & St. Andrews Bay.

Central's first diesel road freight units were nine EMD F3A's in 1947–48, followed in 1949 by five FM H15-44 road-switchers. The latter were not successful in road service and were soon assigned to branchline duty. Beginning in 1950, CofG filled its roster of road-switchers with 15 GP7's, 39 Alco RS3's, 11 GP9's, and 8 GP18's, plus a single SD7 and 6 SD9's. Four each of the GP7's and RS3's were equipped with steam generators for passenger service.

Most of the early road diesels were painted in the blue, gray, and black, a scheme that would continue until 1959 when locomotives began receiving a simplified Pullman green scheme, referred to by some fans as "collard" green, with yellow striping. The GP18's were the only locomotives delivered in green. Early switchers were black with white lettering and the red rectangle on the cab.

After the Southern takeover in 1963, Central's diesels began receiving Southern's black-and-imitation aluminum "tuxedo" scheme, although with Central of Georgia lettering and keeping their original road numbers. Five new GP35's

in December 1963, and then 10 SD35's in 1966, were delivered in this scheme, with the high short hoods preferred by Southern. Beginning in the late '60s, CENTRAL OF GEORGIA on the flanks was replaced by SOUTHERN with small "CG" initials. CofG's GP7's and GP9's were renumbered into Southern's series, but other Central units kept their numbers.

Probably Central of Georgia's best-remembered freight cars were the 50-foot PS-1 boxcars that were black with a large aluminum oval—called a "blimp" on the stencil drawings, often a "football" by train-watchers—on each side. The Central had two groups of these cars, built in 1954 and 1956.

### Southern-era changes

Southern Railway control in 1963 resulted in many immediate changes, as CofG offices and operations in shared terminals were closed or consolidated with Southern facilities. CofG's three operating divisions—Savannah, Macon, and Columbus—remained autonomous (although the Savannah Division was consolidated with the Macon in 1964) until September 1967, when they were absorbed into Southern's Atlanta, Macon and Birmingham-Mobile divisions.

The Central of Georgia Railway ceased to exist in 1971, when Southern merged it, Savannah & Atlanta, Wrightsville & Tennille, and Georgia & Florida ["Fallen Flags Remembered," Spring 2012 CLASSIC TRAINS] into the new Central of Georgia Railroad.

Today, CofG's main route, from Savannah to Macon to Columbus to Birmingham, remains important to Norfolk Southern. Other lines remain—Millen to Augusta, Macon to Atlanta, and Macon

to Albany—but most of the other portions of the independent CofG are either run by short lines or have been abandoned. CofG's riverfront property in Savannah, sold to the State of Georgia in 1958, now is the Ocean Terminal of the Georgia Ports Authority.

The regional system that touted itself as "The Right Way" and grew to almost 2,000 route-miles at its peak, now has been a "Fallen Flag" for half a century. ■

## CofG fact file



(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1961)

**Route-miles:** 1,944; 1,745

**Locomotives:** 331; 139

**Freight cars:** 10,170; 9,513

**Passenger cars:** 262; 107

**Notable passenger trains:** *Nancy Hanks II*, *Man O' War*, *City of Miami*, *Seminole*, *Flamingo*, *Southland*

**Headquarters city:** Savannah, Ga.

**Special interest group:** Central of Georgia Railway Historical Society, 2400 Pleasant View Road, Pleasant View, TN 37146; [www.cofga.org](http://www.cofga.org).

**Recommended reading:** *Central of Georgia and Connecting Lines*, by Richard E. Prince (Prince, 1976); *Images of America: Central of Georgia Railway*, by Jackson McQuigg, Tammy Galloway, and Scott McIntosh (Arcadia Publishing, 1998); *Central of Georgia Steam Locomotives and Trains*, by James H. Goolsby Jr. and Albert M. Langley Jr. (Union Station Publishing, 2006)

**Sources:** *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000) and author's data.