

C&O was Virginia born and bred

Big on coal, Chessie's road ran powerful locomotives and deluxe passenger trains

BY BOB WITHERS



What became the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway began in 1836 when the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, looking forward from the canal-boat era, chartered the Louisa Railroad. By 1849, the line was finished from Taylorsville (later Hanover Junction and now Doswell), a connection with the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac, to Shadwell, 7 miles short of Charlottesville. Reorganized as the Virginia Central in 1850, it built parallel to RF&P south from Doswell into Richmond in 1850. To the west, VC reached Jackson's River Depot, just beyond Clifton Forge, in 1857, but the Civil War halted progress.

In 1861 the Covington & Ohio built west from Covington, Va., but had gotten only to near Callaghan when the war erupted, and workers went home to protect their families. The Virginia Central was critical to the Confederacy during the war, and had an important connection at Gordonsville with the Orange & Alexandria (later part of the Southern Railway system), which reached the nation's capital. Postwar, the VC by 1867 closed the Jackson's River Depot-Covington gap, leading the legislatures of both Virginia and the new state of West Virginia to provide for a new company, Chesapeake & Ohio, to be formed from



On the Ohio "conveyor belt" for Lake Erie-bound coal, an F7 A-B-A trio (top) hammers the B&O diamonds at F Tower in Fostoria, Ohio, in spring 1960. C&O's 60 Lima 2-6-6-6 "Super Power" Alleghenys, exemplified by 1603 in the publicity photo above, were in league with UP's Big Boys.

Top, J. David Ingles; above, C&O

the two and finish the line to the Ohio River. C&O was born August 31, 1868.

Construction reached White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., in June 1869 but stalled again owing to lack of sufficient finances to repair war damages. C&O President W. C. Wickham read of a wealthy mogul's success in tying the Central Pacific with the Union Pacific at Promontory, Utah, just weeks before. He was Collis Potter Huntington, and Wickham convinced him and his investors to buy the C&O and finish the job. The line was completed at Hawk's Nest, along the New River Gorge, on January 29, 1873, with its western terminus on the Ohio River at a new (1871) city that Huntington named after himself. He had intended the C&O to be a part of a coast-to-coast system, but the

1873 economic downturn was too great and C&O fell into receivership in 1878. It was soon reorganized as the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway.

George's railroad?

Huntington continued to expand the C&O, but at this point we come to this question: Why did C&O adopt the slogan "George Washington's Railroad" when the first U.S. president had no ties to the road and died more than 30 years before the Louisa Railroad was chartered? The link, though tenuous, dates to 1785, when Washington envisioned the James River Co. as a Virginia-Ohio River transportation artery. He designed it as a canal system, using the James, New, and Kanawha (Kah-NAW) rivers. The firm did open 7

miles to Westham in 1790, but built no farther and was acquired by the Commonwealth in 1820. Reorganized in 1835, it reached Buchanan in 1851, but by then railroads were succeeding canals.

The right of way was sold in 1878 to the new Richmond & Alleghany Railroad, which in 1880 built along the old towpath, eventually to Clifton Forge. R&A fell into receivership in 1883. It emerged in 1889, and C&O quickly bought it, gaining its desired more direct line across Virginia and acquiring a low-grade route that was better suited for Tidewater-bound coal traffic. Thus did C&O claim a very indirect heritage to the first U.S. president.

C. P. Huntington, meantime, had pointed his road toward the C&O we'd know in the 20th century. His Newport News & Mississippi Valley built through the hills west from Ashland, Ky., to Lexington in 1879; he extended C&O east from Richmond to the port of Newport News, Va., in 1881; and he built west on the south bank of the Ohio River, reaching Cincinnati in 1888. In that year, however, he lost his C&O majority stake in a reorganization to the interests of J. P. Morgan and William K. Vanderbilt. No longer in control, Huntington went back to concentrate on his holdings out west.

Under new leadership, C&O gradually expanded. In 1910 it acquired a road that had built from Cincinnati northwest across Indiana to Hammond, gaining entrance to Chicago via terminal lines. The Hocking Valley, a Toledo–Athens, Ohio, coal road dating from 1877, came into C&O's fold in 1929, C&O having built north from Limeville, Ky., to the HV at Columbus in 1927 to reach the Lake Erie port of Toledo. C&O also spiked down many coal-mine branches in eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia.

C&O's earliest primary cargo was not coal, however, but iron ore, mostly from the Iron Mountain & Greenbrier in Greenbrier County, W.Va., with some shipped from Quinnimont, a mile east of Prince, and taken to Clifton Forge. All that changed, fast, when Col. Joseph Beury shipped the first carload of "New River Smokeless Coal" from Quinnimont in 1873. Coal quickly eclipsed iron ore, with mines and coke ovens opening along the New River Gorge. C&O developed a lucrative business hauling export coal to both Tidewater (Newport News) and the Great Lakes (Toledo). Eventually, C&O also developed a profitable freight business, featuring fast trains such as the *Expediter*, *Speedwest*, and *The Meat Train*.



This is the C&O of 1946, pre-Pere Marquette. The big Russell yard complex is west of Ashland.

Quality varnish

The modern C&O operated three important mainline passenger trains, one dating from the 19th century and two from the Depression era. The New York–Washington–Cincinnati *F.F.V.* began May 11, 1889. Each trainset had a mail-passenger car, a diner, and five coaches, all built by the Pullman Palace Car Co. and painted bright orange with maroon trim. They comprised the first service to be all-vestibuled, steam-heated, and electrically lighted. The interiors were finished in mahogany, rosewood, and cherry, with brown plush seats, mirrors framed in nickel or brass plating, and electric fans and water coolers. On an inspection before start-up, a C&O official joked that the elegant coaches could pass for the homes of "First Families of Virginia," a throwback to Colonial times referring to aristocratic Virginia plantation owners. The name stuck, with a bit of editing to be *Fast Flying Virginian* or just "*F.F.V.*"

A second train was introduced March 30, 1930, between Detroit (via new subsidiary Pere Marquette to Toledo) and Newport News, terminals near popular vacation areas on the Great Lakes and the Virginia shore. Christened *The Sportsman*, its theme was boosted by two exclusive resorts in the route's most scenic area: The Greenbrier, next to the depot at White Sulphur Springs, and The Homestead at Hot Springs, Va., on a 25-mile branch from Covington built by M. E. Ingalls, C&O's president during 1888–90.

C&O owned The Greenbrier during 1910–42 and 1946–2009, when businessman (and future West Virginia Governor) Jim Justice bought it and turned it into a gambling casino. During World

War II, the War Department transformed The Greenbrier into Ashford General Hospital for injured military personnel. The resorts, patronized by U.S. presidents and wealthy vacationers, were served by *The Sportsman* and other regular varnish, plus specials, primarily from the east. A mixed train hauled many a private car up the branch to The Homestead.

Arguably C&O's most famous train was *The George Washington*, introduced April 24, 1932, when the country was preparing to celebrate the bicentennial of our first president's birth. C&O rebuilt 22 Pullman sleepers, two library-lounge-observation cars, three dining cars, and three "Imperial Salon Cars" for it, adding Pullman Car Manufacturing's air-conditioning system. Everything was repainted Pullman green and gold, with THE GEORGE WASHINGTON on the letterboards. Every sleeping car and every room in them was named for a person in Washington's life. Other decorations included paintings connected to the cars' names, stationery displaying the train name and Washington's coat of arms, china bearing Washington's likeness, a reproduction of Jean-Antoine Houdon's bust of Washington, and oval rear-car tail signs featuring Gilbert Stuart's Athenaeum portrait of Washington.

Notable leaders

Talented executives guided C&O through the Great Depression and afterward. Eccentric bachelor brothers Oris P. and Mantis J. Van Sweringen, Cleveland real estate moguls (popularly called "the Vans"), bought the Nickel Plate Road in 1916 and by 1924 had expanded their empire to include the Erie, C&O, and



In late 1948, Hudson 310 (top) is ready to lead *The George Washington* east from Ashland, Ky., where the Louisville and Cincinnati (and later also Detroit) sections combined. C&O's attractive passenger livery is seen (above) on the *Newport News* section, with E8 4021, in fall '68.

Top, C&O photo, author's collection; above, Bob Krone

Pere Marquette. Eventually they'd add Wheeling & Lake Erie, Chicago & Eastern Illinois, Missouri Pacific, and a half interest in the Rio Grande. After the ICC rebuffed their 1920s merger ideas, they put all into a new holding company, Allegheny Corp., in 1929 — just in time for the stock market crash and Depression to unravel it all.

Lionel C. Probert, who handled C&O public relations, advertising, and promotional programs as assistant to the president, is credited with coming up with the ideas that became *The Sportsman*, *The George Washington*, and a sleepy kitten mascot named Chessie, arguably the most famous "pet" in U.S. railroading.

Possibly the most well-known, and surely the most controversial, of 20th century C&O leaders was Robert R. Young, a Wall Street investor and financier who bought up many of the Vans'

devalued companies in the 1930s, gaining control of C&O and affiliates including the PM. He became board chairman in 1942 and started guiding the railroad into the future. He added the "for progress" line to C&O's emblem. Calling heavy-weight sleepers "rolling tenements" and believing railroads would see a postwar passenger boom, he ordered 287 light-weight sleeping cars, coaches, and head-end cars from Pullman-Standard in 1946, fuming in ads that "a hog can cross the country without changing trains — but YOU can't." He also ordered 46 cars from Budd and three steam-turbine locomotives from Baldwin for the *Chessie* streamliner, a project well-known as a grand mistake because the service never materialized in the relatively weak Washington-Cincinnati market. Young had C&O rebuild four Pacific type locomotives into streamlined 4-6-4s to handle

the *Chessie's* secondary-line connections, and he also planned Train X, an articulated low-center-of-gravity concoction that went nowhere.

After World War II C&O, which had controlled Pere Marquette since 1928, formally merged it on June 6, 1947, almost doubling its mileage and gaining PM's three Lake Michigan carferry routes. The boats sailed from Ludington, Mich., to Wisconsin connections at Kewaunee (Green Bay & Western), Manitowoc (Chicago & North Western and Soo Line), and Milwaukee (Milwaukee Road), where PM/C&O stationed its own ferry-slip switch engine. As with the Hocking Valley, C&O bought the Toledo Terminal [page 54] to connect with PM.

Powerful "Super" steam

An important legacy of the Vans' C&O (and PM) ownership was the Advisory Mechanical Committee, which guided all their roads' locomotive designs and purchases, and whose members were influenced by the Super Power revolution launched by Lima Locomotive Works' William E. Woodard. Working with Woodard and Lima, C&O in 1930 introduced the T-1 class 2-10-4, built to haul coal from the Russell, Ky., yard to the Toledo docks. The 40 T-1s within a few years had plenty of Super Power company on C&O, including 12 dual-service 4-8-4s, all Lima-built during 1935-48 and called Greenbriers, not Northerns; 13 4-6-4 Hudsons from Baldwin (300 series) during 1941-48 for passenger service; 60 2-6-6-6 Allegheny types from Lima during 1941-48; and 90 versatile 2-8-4s from Alco and Lima during 1943-47, called Kanawhas, not Berkshires.

In absorbing Pere Marquette in 1947, C&O acquired its 39 Lima 2-8-4s. PM had started dieselizing before the merger, and C&O finished that quickly, with mostly products from Detroit-based General Motors' Electro-Motive Division. This enabled C&O on its traditional lines to continue burning in locomotives the coal they hauled, keeping customers happy for a little while longer than it might have. C&O even moved some PM Berks south from Michigan ["Vagabonds of the Pere Marquette," Fall 2016 CLASSIC TRAINS].

With the ICC's blessing, C&O became affiliated with the Baltimore & Ohio in 1963, with an eye toward merger once the financially anemic "bride is brought up to her potential," as a C&O spokesman said of the B&O. By this time of affiliation,



The blue and yellow of today's CSX harks clear back to the Pere Marquette and University of Michigan. GP30 3024 shows off the yellow-nose 1960s version at Bison Yard in Buffalo, N.Y.

Ken Kraemer

second-generation diesels were on hand, and C&O's EMD and GE units shared number series with B&O's (all EMDs), from the likes of GP30s, SD35s, and U23Bs to ever-increasing higher-horsepower varieties of them.

By the time Amtrak launched on May 1, 1971, only the *Pere Marquettes* between Detroit, Grand Rapids, Mich., and Chicago and *The George Washington* were left. The *George* ran daily between Washington and Cincinnati, with the name if not the coaches continuing to St. Louis on B&O, plus connections between Charlottesville and Newport News; Ashland and Louisville; and Ashland and Detroit (Friday-Saturday-Sunday only). The *George* eventually morphed into Amtrak's triweekly *Cardinal* between New York and Chicago, via Cincinnati and Indianapolis, and there is also Amtrak's Michigan-supported *Pere Marquette* between Grand Rapids and Chicago.

In 1972, to improve the affiliated companies' marketing image, President Hays Watkins launched the "Chessie System" monicker with an in-house design of blue, yellow, and vermilion with a silhouetted Chessie cat in the "C." In 1980, the ICC approved a merger of Chessie System and Seaboard Coast Line Industries into a holding company called CSX Corp. Finally in 1986, the holding company formed CSX Transportation, which the corporate entities would absorb. C&O took in B&O on April 30, 1987, and C&O went into CSXT the following October

31, finally lowering C&O's "flag." Today, CSXT's 21,000-mile system blanketing 23 eastern states plus Ontario includes many former C&O (and B&O) main lines. ■

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C&O FACT FILE



(comparative figures are for 1929, 1948 [including Pere Marquette], and 1972)

Route-miles: 2,740; 4,689; 4,994

Locomotives: 946; 1,169; 1,030

Passenger cars: 427; 540; 92 (1970)

Freight cars: 53,518; 67,853; 74,962

Headquarters cities: Richmond, Va.; after the 1920s, Cleveland, Ohio

Special interest group: Chesapeake & Ohio Historical Society, cohs.org [see page 88]

Notable passenger trains: *The George Washington*; *F.F.V.*; *The Sportsman*

Recommended reading: Books on C&O are too numerous to list. Search for authors Thomas W. Dixon, Geoffrey H. Doughty, Kevin N. EuDaly, Eugene L. Huddleston, Jeremy F. Plant, and Alvin F. Stauffer, among others

Sources: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads*, Third Edition (Kalmbach, 2014)