

The NC&StL was “Grandpa’s Road”

Long a semi-autonomous L&N subsidiary, “the NC” was a family affair • By David Iyata



Sanding the rails up Cumberland Mountain out of Cowan on March 30, 1946, NC&StL “Stripe” 582 is helped by two 2-8-2 pushers on the rear.

Hugh M. Comer

Although the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway employed several nicknames — “Dixie Line,” “Nashville Road,” and “Lookout Mountain Route” among them — to former employees and their families, it will always be “Grandpa’s Road.”

James A. Skelton was one of those Grandpas. He was 14 in April 1862, and although the War Between the States was still far from Big Shanty, Ga., times were hard for young Jim and his family. He was the oldest of four and doing what he could to help their widowed mother.

A train crew told the youth the railroad was looking to hire a water boy and a yard engine fireman in Cartersville, so about 6 a.m. on April 12, he bought a ticket and boarded the passenger car of a northbound mixed train that had stopped in Big Shanty.

“He saw a passel of strangers walk by,” says Joe Bozeman, 72, Jim’s great-grandson whose family still lives in Big Shanty (now Kennesaw). “He opened a window and watched; it wasn’t uncommon for the fireman and brakeman to do some switching while the rest of the crew

was having breakfast in the Lacy Hotel.”

“I heard them uncouple the car, and then they disappeared around the curve,” Skelton later recalled. The locomotive *General* and three boxcars were gone. People poured out of the hotel, hollering, “They’ve stolen the train!” He was the last living witness of that famous Andrews Raid when he died in 1940.

Young Jim never got a railroad job in Cartersville on what was then the Western & Atlantic. He enlisted in the Georgia militia and was a guard at the POW camp in Andersonville, but he hired on the W&A after the war, retiring in 1903 as a section foreman. Skelton’s father had been a section hand on the railroad, and all but one of Jim’s sons, and many of their sons, worked for the W&A and/or its successor, the NC&StL.

“The thing I always heard was that if you wanted to work for the NC&StL [usually spoken as ‘N C and Saint L,’ or just ‘NC’], you were either born into it or married into it,” Bozeman says. “Every railroader I ever knew who worked for the road had a relative there — father, grandfather, great-grandfather. I’m not

saying that’s always good, but that’s the way it was. There was a lot of dedication to the road; they took care of you, and you were supposed to take care of them.”

Author and historian Mark S. Womack, 93, of Chattanooga, concurs. He signed on as an operator in 1941. “The NC was known as Grandpa’s Road because so many kinfolk worked for it,” says Womack, who was an officer for L&N after the 1957 merger and retired in 1983 as superintendent of rules for L&N’s Family Lines sibling Seaboard Coast Line.

Womack says one of his former boss-



Compare W&A 4-4-0 No. 3, the Civil War-era *General*, with 565, first of NC’s five J2 class 4-8-4 “Dixies” built at Schenectady in 1930.

H. C. Hill, James G. Boyle collection

es, S. P. Strickland, started as an operator on NC's Atlanta Division and rose to assistant vice president of transportation for L&N. Yet at the NC, even after he'd become an officer, "it wasn't unusual for a conductor or engineer to call him 'Strick,' and he never objected to it. I never heard anything like that on the L&N. There, it was 'Mister So-and-So.'"

The NC&StL story is of two railroads that came together: the Nashville & Chattanooga, chartered by Tennessee in 1845 to connect its namesake cities, and the Western & Atlantic, created in 1836 and owned to this day by the State of Georgia. J. Edgar Thomson, chief engineer of the Georgia Railroad & Banking Co. and later president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, laid out the N&C main line southeast from Nashville, crossing the Cumberland range, the Tennessee River, Raccoon Mountain, and circling Look-out Mountain into Chattanooga. With a tunnel through Cumberland Mountain and bridges over the Tennessee, the first train went the entire 152 miles on February 11, 1854. Another early line, Southern Railway predecessor Memphis & Charleston, building up the river valley, met N&C at Stevenson, Ala., and used it to enter Chattanooga. To this day CSX and Norfolk Southern share that line from Stevenson to Wauhatchie, Tenn.

W&A built north from an arbitrary spot that one day would be Atlanta. Given the primitive locomotive technology, U.S. Army Lt. Col. Stephen H. Long laid out a line without heavy grades. This meant curves, 10,000 degrees' worth, the equivalent of 28 circles in 138 miles. After a 1,447-foot tunnel through Chetoogeta Mountain was bored, the first train ran through on May 9, 1850; the tunnel was replaced by a larger one in the 1920s.

Connected, the N&C and W&A comprised an arrow pointing to the heart of the South, which Union forces quickly recognized in 1861 when hostilities with the Confederacy broke out. Union troops captured Nashville in February '62, and future offensives would be staged there.

"Andrews' Raiders," Union soldiers in civilian clothing led by undercover agent James J. Andrews, infiltrated Georgia and stole the *General* at Big Shanty. Their objective was to lift rails and burn bridges to cut off Chattanooga. Their mission failed, the raiders were captured, and Andrews and seven of his men were hanged as spies; the others escaped or were exchanged. Chattanooga held out



until September 1863. (The raiders were the first recipients of the U.S. Medal of Honor for military valor, and their story inspired the 1956 Walt Disney movie, *The Great Locomotive Chase*.) The Union Army drove down the N&C to Chattanooga and the W&A to Atlanta, which fell in September 1864.

Enter the L&N

In 1870 N&C leased the Nashville & Northwestern, extending it 168 miles to the Mississippi River at Hickman, Ky., and two years later bought it, soon renaming the combined lines Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis. President Edmund W. Cole sought an extension to St. Louis, but that did not happen.

Cole also hoped to assume the W&A lease held by his friend, former Georgia Gov. Joseph E. Brown, allowing him to

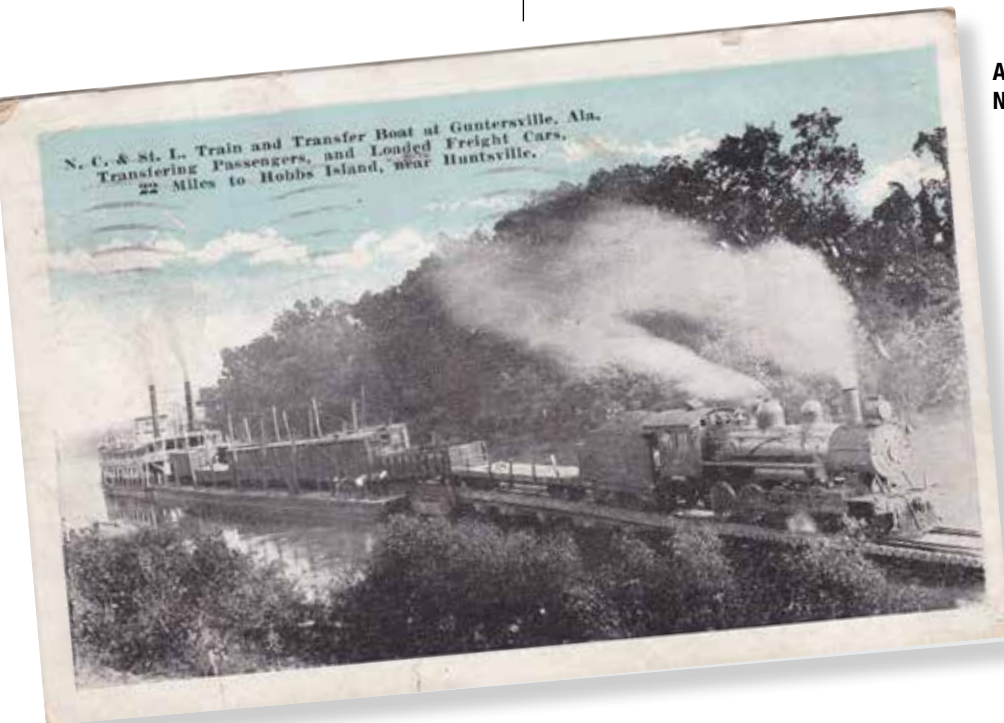
reach Atlanta. Archrival Louisville & Nashville, though, had seen enough. In 1880 it got stock control of the NC and ousted Cole, so it would be the Louisville-based "Old Reliable," not the Nashville Road, doing the empire-building. L&N allowed NC to operate separately, but Louisville would call the shots.

NC&StL did get to the Ohio River, at Paducah, Ky., mouth of the Tennessee River, when L&N bought the Paducah, Tennessee & Alabama and the Tennessee Midland from foreclosure and in 1896 directed subsidiary NC to lease them. The two formed a 254-mile semicircle from Memphis east and north, crossing NC's Nashville Division at Bruceton, Tenn. On the south end, the new Paducah & Memphis Division gave NC direct access to Memphis, and at Paducah, a connection with the Burlington Route.



Led on the NC by a typical F7 A-B duo, the Chicago–Jacksonville *Dixie Flyer* sits in Chattanooga Union Station in August 1954; it lasted into early '66. Its route involved C&EI, L&N, NC, and ACL.

James G. Bogle collection



A 1921 “NC Navy” postcard shows Baldwin 2-8-0 No. 356 unloading the carfloat at the south ramp.

Lucy Slusher collection

helped tap the booming Florida tourist trade with the Midwest–Florida “Dixie” trains *Dixie Flyer*, *Dixie Limited*, and *Dixie Flagler*, plus the 1946 St. Louis– (later Chicago–) Atlanta streamliner *Georgian*.

The road had its share of unique items and was a pioneer. Historian Dain L. Schult says NC was the only southern road to try a Camelback and a duplex; neither type worked out. It tried radio dispatching in the 1920s, and in 1930 was the first Southeast road to acquire 4-8-4s, which it called the Dixie type. In 1947, it outshopped its own streamliner, the *City of Memphis*, a handsome train of updated heavyweights led by a shrouded 4-6-2 [Summer 2000 CT].

The Dixie Line, as NC called itself, ran five Russian Decapods on lighter-rail lines and kept three 2-8-8-2 Baldwin Mallets for pusher service on Cumberland Mountain. Further, NC locomotives had distinctive, British-style capped smokestacks painted red. The roster’s zenith was 25 dual-service 4-8-4s. After J2s 565–569, the first Dixies, in 1930, Schenectady built two groups of 10 J3-class streamstyled sisters in 1942–43. Their different style running-board skirts led to the nicknames “Yellow Jackets” for the 570s and “Stripes” for the 580s.

The NC had a pusher base in Cowan, Tenn., for Cumberland Mountain’s 2.5 percent ruling grade and curves of 5 to 6½ degrees. The summit is inside a 2,228-foot tunnel. At the north portal, the branch to Tracy City and Palmer crossed over the main on a stone arch bridge, the site of many publicity photos. The branch was abandoned in the 1980s, but the bridge remains, although it’s on private property that is patrolled.

Although NC&StL was far from an ocean or a big lake, it maintained a long water transfer. In 1893 NC found itself with a segment, Guntersville to Gadsden, Ala., “orphaned” from the rest of the system so it figured a tow boat and carfloat moving 22 miles on the Tennessee River between Hobbs Island, south of Huntsville, and Guntersville would be cheaper than building a bridge and more railroad. This “NC&StL Navy” shuttled cars up and down the river until 1960.

“It was a wonderful little family railroad,” confirms Mary Elizabeth Chambliss, 86, of Jackson, Tenn. She joined NC&StL as a 17-year-old operator in

NC and the Burlington built a bridge over the Ohio at nearby Metropolis, Ill., which opened on January 1, 1918. Six years later Illinois Central bought in to extend its Edgewood Cutoff freight line.

Atlanta was attained by NC&StL in 1890 when the W&A lease came up for renewal and, with some bid-rigging, NC was the winning suitor. The original N&C became the Chattanooga Division and W&A the Atlanta Division. Although the Western & Atlantic name vanished, the company still exists on paper, as the current lease, signed by L&N and held by CSX, runs through 2019.

Historian Richard E. Prince cites the Tennessee Centennial Exposition of 1897

in Nashville as a logical dividing point in NC&StL history. From its founding before the Civil War, it was building, expanding, and acquiring, achieving a peak of 1,259 route-miles. Afterward came 60 years of better locomotives and rolling stock, and capital improvements.

NC’s main lines connected Memphis, Nashville, and Atlanta. Secondary lines reached Paducah and Hickman, Ky., plus Huntsville and Gadsden, Ala. A half dozen branches into the Tennessee hills brought out timber, phosphate, limestone, coal, and iron, and farther south, cotton. NC developed traffic and industries, modernized its fleet of steam locomotives, and with L&N and other roads,



NC’s only SW1, a 1941 vet along with two each VOs and S1s and an NW2, is front and center at Nashville circa 1950 with F units and one of 32 freight GP7s. NC never owned a six-axle diesel.

Linn H. Westcott



Even some NC&StL boxcars wore “stripes.”

J. David Ingles

1948 [Winter 2003 CT] and retired from CSX in 1988. “Everybody was related; it was a small railroad, and everyone wanted it to be the best.” On the other hand, she says, “You’d have to be careful what you said about someone, because he’d be related to someone else on the railroad.”

Chambliss, naturally, is family. She learned the craft from her father Robert Bracken, an operator in Jackson.

Progress, decline, merger

NC&StL was among southern roads to dieselize early, doing so after World War II. A 1906 Baldwin 2-8-0 led the last steam run, a Bruceton–Union City, Tenn., passenger local on January 4, 1953. The transition began with a 1941 order for Alco S1 switchers, 4 received by 1946. During the war came 7 each Alco S2s and Baldwin VOs, plus an EMD SW1 and an NW2. During 1948–52, NC went on a big EMD spree, taking 19 switchers of three models, 52 F units, and 37 GP7s. It also bought four GE 44-tonners in 1950 for light yard duty. NC totaled 9 F3As, 12 F3Bs, 23 F7As, and 8 F7Bs, all considered “dual-service” units, but only the B units had steam generators.

Its first six GP7s, 700–705, had switcher (Type A) trucks, which crews hated for their bone-rattling rides. The last five, 750–754, had steam generators and, like the Fs, were painted blue and gray; other diesels wore maroon with a yellow band, a livery also seen on some freight cars.

Coal mined on-line was an important commodity, and assorted industries had arisen: cement-making in Cowan; steam boiler fabrication in Chattanooga; and steel pipe production in Gadsden. Few knew it then, but owing to resource depletion, environmental regulation, advancing technology, and overseas competition, this traffic became endangered and in a generation or so was gone. Ditto passenger traffic, as on most railroads.

By the mid-1950s, an era of railroad

mergers was at hand, and after four late-1940s absorptions (Alton, Moffat Road, Pere Marquette, Wheeling & Lake Erie), NC&StL was the next to go. On August 30, 1957, after 77 years of tolerating it as a semi-autonomous entity, L&N merged the NC out of existence. The former NC branches would go, some abandoned and some sold to short lines. The Paducah Gateway is history, but the Memphis–Nashville–Chattanooga–Atlanta trunk remains, though part of the west end is on ex-L&N trackage. About 700 miles of the NC are still in service, 435 under CSX.

L&N not only adopted “The Dixie Line” as its own slogan, it thoroughly purged the NC&StL from corporate memory. NC being “family,” though, is why the proposed return to steam of No. 576, a 1942 class J3 “Yellow Jacket” 4-8-4 on display in Nashville’s Centennial Park since 1953, generates excitement in NC territory. It acknowledges the memory of something long gone, but cherished. ■

DAVID IBATA, of Kennesaw, Ga., has been editor of The Dixie Flyer, the newsletter of the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway Preservation Society, since 2009. A Southern Illinois University graduate, he has worked for the Chicago Tribune and Atlanta Journal-Constitution. This is his first CLASSIC TRAINS byline.

**NC&StL
fact file**



(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1956)

Route-miles: 1,223; 1,043

Locomotives: 249; 132

Passenger cars: 219; 106

Freight cars: 8,510; 6,761

Headquarters city: Nashville, Tenn.

Special interest group: Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway Preservation Society, ncstl.com

Notable passenger trains: *Dixie Flagler, Dixie Flyer, City of Memphis, Georgian*

Recommended reading: *Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis: A History of “The Dixie Line,”* by Dain L. Schult (TLC Publishing, 2002); *Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway: History and Steam Locomotives,* by Richard E. Prince (Wheelwright Lithography Co., 1967; reprinted by Indiana University Press, 2001).

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