



CENTER CITY

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Mid - America Crossroad

A History of Memphis Transportation

By 1850, the city of Memphis was about to forge its way into recognition as a viable contender amongst American cities in the field of commerce. According to Capers' Biography of a River Town: "The cotton interests of Memphis were primarily responsible for its transportation program, but other commercial houses were equally benefited, and the bluff became a depot which supplied a large and everexpanding hinterland with all its necessities."

The NEW ORLEANS CRESCENT printed in 1850 these painful words of recognition: "If Memphis already begins to attract the trade of Arkansas, we may kiss it goodbye, for when the Mississippi and Atlantic railroad is completed, Memphis promises to be the most important town in the Southwest after New Orleans."

Thus it was, that Memphis became the "logical depot for the distribution of upper western produce to southern planters." "In Mississippi as well as in Illinois the welfare of the West depended upon improved means of transportation; yet South Carolina and Virginia, not merely Massachusetts, rejected the proposal that the national government should bear the expense of internal improvements, projects which none of the western states was rich enough to finance independently."¹

The editor of the RAILROAD RECORD of Cincinnati concurred, writing: "If Memphis would be great she must make railways and build factories."

These being the objectives and obstacles a West-

ern and Southwestern Convention was convened in Memphis in 1845. "In essence it was a mart where various representatives of the South and the West came to trade their influence in return for particular projects of their own, hoping by thus pooling resources to wrest from the East what had long been denied them."¹

C. Calvert, in his Origin and Development of the Railroads in the Lower Mississippi, described the "commercial conventions" this way:

Every question of importance that was to be considered by the public was presented by calling delegates to a convention to be held at some central point, where the questions were discussed pro and con and a final decision reached.

In accordance with this custom, there were two such conventions held in Memphis in 1845, one in July and a larger one in November, to consider the whole question of transportation, together with such incidental questions as should be injected into the discussion.

The convention of November was composed of more than six hundred delegates from sixteen states, and was said to have been 'second to none since the adoption of the federal constitution,' including some of the most prominent men in the country. The great statesman John C. Calhoun presided over the

deliberations....

...The political unrest in the country had begun to divide the people along sectional lines and the political leaders saw that more rapid means of communication and travel between the Atlantic Seaboard and the Mississippi Valley was a necessity if the Southern states were to present a solid front to the north.

It was during this convention that eyes were favorably cast upon Memphis as the urban center to serve as the link between the Mississippi and the Atlantic. In 1846, the Memphis-Charleston Railroad was chartered to provide "continuous railway communication...from the city of Memphis to the city of Charleston."² The road was to run from Memphis to Corinth, Mississippi, to Decatur and Stevenson, Alabama, on to Charleston.

The COMMERCIAL APPEAL, on February 18, 1857, heralded its eminent completion:

For several weeks past the hotels and boarding houses of Memphis have been literally crowded with persons from the adjoining counties and neighboring states, giving a foretaste of what will be when our railroad connections are made. The Memphis and Charleston Railroad when completed... will pour upon us another flood of travel. Property owners must prepare to welcome these strangers with fine or comfortable houses, should it suit their tastes or interest to pitch their tents among us.

It was consummated later that year:

When the road was completed nearly 25,000 people visited Memphis upon the invitation of the Railroad company to celebrate the successful completion of so important a work and also to witness the 'marriage,' as it was called, of the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River. This ceremony consisted in pouring a hogshead of Atlantic water into the Mississippi amidst the booming of cannon and the shouting of the people.²

And in 1861, Memphis was joined to Louisville and Nashville by way of Paris, Tennessee.

During the Civil War "the significant role of Memphis...was its position as the depot for most of the contraband trade between North and South." While in command of the Federals occupying Memphis in 1862, Sherman reflected upon the political pressures from the upper West to ease trade restrictions, saying: "If trade be opened Memphis is better to our enemy than be-

fore it was taken." And General Washburne, in command in 1864, said, "Memphis has been of more value to the southern Confederacy since it fell into our hands than Nassau."¹

Memphis has probably not since that war greatly altered her code as an independent unit of trade, for as Capers sums up those times: "After the capture, both loyal and disloyal sentiment was practically nonexistent in Memphis, but public opinion was bitter against any regulations which interfered with business and pleasure, war or no war."

Memphis continued to grow as a commercial center, but not without great difficulties, until at the turn of the century it burst into the city we are more familiar with. In 1893, the Memphis and Charleston line became the Memphis Division of the Southern. At this time too, the city began its sprawl north, south and east:

In 1904, an even wider area of industrial sites was opened up by the construction of a railroad belt line in a semi-circle around the city. Skirting the outlying manufacturing districts, it penetrated with spur tracks the new South Memphis area and the Wolf River lumber section on the North.

Even Memphis' urban crime crisis was attributed to the fact that it was at the crossroads:

"There were more basic explanations for the city's high murder rate. Memphis, with its reputation as a resort town, attracted unstable people, both white and Negro. Its location along the main lines of transportation made it a stopover place for vagrants...³

"By 1902 the automobile was... a matter of public concern."³ And as rare as it happens, the COMMERCIAL APPEAL was on top of this problem:

The rapid gait of the automobile is apt to cause many runaways and much damage to life and property.... We can very readily imagine the day when the farmers and country people will repel this danger just as did their forefathers the perils of the wilderness....

A few catastrophes... and those who have suffured... will get out their guns again, and will treat the automobile as their forefathers treated the panther and bear.

Yet the railroads continued to grow as the primary means of inter-city passenger transportation through the 40's and early 50's. However, with the increasing availability and economy of the auto and airplane, and emphasis on a sepa-

rate mobility and speed, the passenger rail ceased to pay as well, and service virtually came to a halt in the South in the late 60's. But let us briefly return to an account of the last great days of the past era of the passenger railroad.

G. W. Lindsay reported in 1946 that the same rails were in heavy use by the Memphis Division of the Southern Railways as were built and used originally by the Memphis-Charleston line:

As is true of so much of railroads those who built, built well, for into their work went not only money, labor, stone and steel, but dreams and hopes and the hearts of many men.

He wrote that there were two through passes daily out of Union Station: one left at 9 a.m. arriving in Chattanooga at 7:25 p.m., and a second, the "Tennessean," which departed at 8 p.m.; it was a 2000 hp, 2 unit diesel painted green and white, with "stainless steel reclining seats," that streamlined for Washington, D.C. And after every trip the "Tennessean" was washed to make it a shining spectacle as it passed each town along its route.²

Consumption as an End

Today we produce and buy: shoes that can't be walked in; airplanes we can't land and fly safely; missiles we must not fire; and millions of automobiles we know cannot be fueled nor be provided storage space without marring the landscape. Yet there are railroads still functioning on lines which were constructed over a century ago.

I shall not speak in this segment of crisis, for it is obvious that the compulsive American consumer is willing to spill coins on the counter and does not respond to dramatics which he or she does not wish to hear. But let us assume for a moment that there are priority usages for petroleum and its by-products: for plastics, chemicals, heating fuel, etc. Then let us assume that we habitate a limited world with finite material resources.

Could we not better use our supply of these resources by providing more economical, fixed-route public transportation across the wide expanses of land between American cities.

Such a necessary system I believe is called for across the State of Tennessee. The most obvious point of departure in coordinating such a line is Memphis, through which a major East-West transportation corridor of the fixed-route type should pass. The line should give access to Nashville, Chattanooga and Knoxville, connecting Memphis with the Amtrak line stretching from Atlanta to Washington, D.C. and New York. West it should link Memphis with Little Rock and the Amtrak line to Dallas and Mexico. Memphis

would truly become the hub of Mid-America.

Arkansas has shown its foresight in the field of transportation by requesting more stops in Arkansas from Amtrak operated lines and by purchasing 150 miles of the Reading for state operation as a tourist attraction.

There are more benefits to such a system than just fuel economics and commerce. We are also speaking of a relaxing and more inexpensive mode of travel, i.e., more frequent communication between different peoples without the debilitating concerns of the automobile. But there is no cause to further expound on the faults of the symbol of affluence, power and fragmentation which possesses the American way of life, because at the moment Memphis has provided no alternatives.

The COMMERCIAL APPEAL reported Senator Scott saying: "We have a whole generation of people who have never ridden on a train. They would be very happy to do so." The pleasure to be derived from convenient rail travel-- patiently attending to the details of the countryside, and the opportunities for meeting and conversing with people-- I would consider amongst the best arguments for extending rail services.

There is in existence a feasibility study for such a rail line across Tennessee done by the Amtrak Corporation. But I believe more consideration was given to a direct construction than to the restoration, of say, the old Memphis-Charleston line. After unsuccessfully attempting to obtain this study for the past two months, I feel confident that Amtrak is not at this time inclined to involve itself financially in updating Southern passenger transportation corridors. However, you should be reminded that should a state legislature petition Amtrak for extended service and accept responsibility for two-thirds of the losses to possibly be incurred, the Amtrak Corporation is obligated, by act of Congress, to respond favorably to such a request.

If we have the foresight to want to initiate an East-West passenger rail service we should urge our Councilpersons to join with other cities across the state, and possibly even convene a state-wide transportation conference, in petitioning the Tennessee Legislature to file a formal request in Washington, D. C. for actuation of the service.

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In 1973 the COMMERCIAL APPEAL published an article in which James L. Warsher, Amtrak's Manager of Terminal Coordination, is quoted from a conversation concerning the possibility of a new terminal here in Memphis and expanded services. He said: "Memphis is the logical Mid-America point from the operational and marketing stand-

point, but we have no definite plans for additional services...."

One of the potential services Warsher reportedly discussed was a Memphis-Little Rock-Fort Worth-Laredo, Texas line. In the same article Warsher said that if the City of Memphis were to construct a multi-purpose transportation center in the downtown area, "...Amtrak would like to be a tenant."

After myself taking a train trip to New Orleans on the Panama Limited, in September of 1973, I wrote a letter to Amtrak much concerned with the discouraging conditions and the location of the Memphis terminal. I received an eager reply in February 1974 which assured me that all Amtrak stations would be either renovated or replaced in the near future.

Clay Huddleston, the City's Chief Administrative Officer, has frequently expressed the desire to build a publicly owned transportation terminal in the downtown area, to serve as an Amtrak, bus and connector air terminal. The terminal, he has said, could be financed by "a general obligation bond issue using revenues from leases inside the structure to back the bonds."

However, the terminal, which all indicators seem to point out the necessity and possibility of, has been located by Mr. Huddleston on the public promenade west of the convention center. Mr. Huddleston is wise in proposing that Memphians very soon should focus on public transportation by constructing a central downtown facility. And he is correct in desiring to use the city owned promenade for such a broad, public purpose. But in light of the possibilities of a future East-West passenger rail corridor the city would be hasty in solely considering this location without exploring

the possible route these tracks would take through the Downtown.

There are many I am sure not disposed to the slower railroad mode of travel, and to whom speed is of primary importance. But there are again many who are not pleased with: the annoyances of noise and pollution, congestion, rising prices due to fuel scarcity, desecrated landscape and neighborhoods, the exorbitant subsidy of street and highway maintenance, the expense in money and time, and the boredom and dangers of the automobile. *I am not here advocating the premature extinction of the automobile, but the more efficient use of it and the petroleum it burns. This idea of course is not novel: it is called public transportation-- a concept which I do not fear using in that it has been in existence for well over a century.*

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1. Capers, Biography of a River Town
 2. G. W. Lindsay, Memphis-its railroads and their history
 3. Miller, Memphis: During the Progressive Era
 4. C. Calvert, Origin and Development of the Railroads in the Lower Mississippi
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CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

Serving from 11:30 to 1:00

First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue

PRICE: \$1.25 per serving, including drink

MENU FOR SEPTEMBER 5-13

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 5

Fried Chicken, rice and gravy, squash and rolls

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6

Ham, potato salad, green beans and rolls

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9

Country-fried steak, blackeyed peas, creamed corn, & corn bread

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10

Oven-baked chicken, rice and gravy, peas and carrots & rolls

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11

Spaghetti, cole slaw, and French Bread

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 12

Corned Beef, scalloped cabbage, buttered potatoes, corn bread

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13

Beef stew, tossed salad, and corn bread

Center City

First Presbyterian Church
166 Poplar Avenue
Memphis, Tennessee 38103

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