

THE SENTINEL

The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in the Civil War



Who among us has not played with toy trains as a child, counted boxcars when held up at a track crossing our path, taken that romantic rail ride, be it a day or a week, or listened wistfully at the distant, beckoning sound of an engine's whistle in the still of the night? Railroads, and the trains that ply them, have been the romantic backdrop for a nation struggling to burst out of its colonialism since rail travel first became practical in the early 19th century.

Former presenter, executive board member and friend of the Roundtable John Crosby has combined his lifelong passion for railroading, both modeled and genuine, with his expertise on the history of one of the founding railroads in the nation, and especially to its impact on the Civil War. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the first chartered line in the country, was established 1827 by the Maryland General Assembly. John Quincy Adams was President at the time. It was started as an economic defense to the business that was being lost to the port cities of New York and Philadelphia with the western terminus city of Wheeling. Baltimore was closer, but did not have the natural connections that its more prominent neighbors to the north did. A Railroad could make that connection and allow the city of Baltimore to regain some of the economic growth it had lost.

The path chosen was to generally follow the Potomac River bed westward to Cumberland, Maryland, thence on to Grafton Virginia and on to wheeling. This simple and direct path would become an extreme point of dissension and controversy after

1861. After the outbreak of war, the utility of this modern means of transportation for troops and materials was obvious, but was the B&O a northern or southern line? That quandary hung in balance for a time, but eventually the railroad's President, John Garrett, decided the industrial possibilities of the North were more important than the agrarian interests of the South, and this despite Garrett being a strong Southern sympathizer. In the end, money talks! The obvious difficulty became the fact that fully two-thirds or more of the line ran through a seceded state, Virginia. The first two years of the war saw the B&O being destroyed by one side, usually the South, then rebuilt by the other as control of the line and its right of way swayed back and forth between warring armies. After West Virginia was established in June of 1863, the B&O more comfortably traveled through almost all Northern territory.

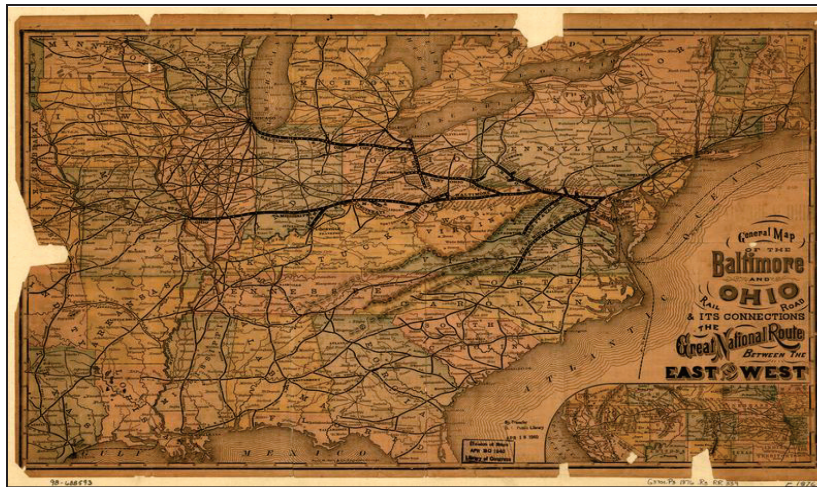
Maryland, while never seceding, had a strong element of Southern sympathy in it, especially early in the war, and it was assumed by many that constantly upsetting traffic along the line of the B&O, controlled by the North, would help take that state over the edge and in full accord with the Confederacy. The opposite, however, became the fact. Marylanders began to resent

the constant interruption of what it considered to be its major economic lifeline and actually pushed the state to the Union point of view more and more.

The reader will have to dig on their own for the details of all the engagements and encounters that the B&O was involved with during the Civil War, but certainly one of note was the one that began on September 23, 1863,

when US Secretary of War Edwin Stanton needed to move 20,000 men and their supplies from Culpepper Court House in Virginia to Bridgeport, Alabama, on the Tennessee River, after the Union defeat at Chickamauga. No other such movement had ever been attempted and many thought it impossible. While the entire transfer did not happen with quite the speed that Stanton had anticipated, it did finish successfully and was proof of the remarkable ability of railroads to move almost anything...quickly! The days of clinging to river routes and digging canals were over forever.

In the end, the activities of the B&O during the war accomplished three major goals. First, as we have said, it pioneered the mass movement of troops and materiel in time of war. Second, The B&O was instrumental in holding the state of Maryland in



An 1870 B & O map

The B&O continued

Union hands. Third, it was essential in protecting and keeping Washington, D.C., the Union Capitol, safe when it could easily have become isolated in southern territory and lost, an event that alone could have changed the outcome of the entire war.

The B&O would thrive for decades after the war, lasting as an individual entity until 1963 when it merged with the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Ten years later the entire system was renamed the Chessie System and eventually morphed into the CSX, still plying the tracks of the Eastern US to this day.



Tom Thumb, first American steam engine in regular service

The Overlease Library

Construction will soon begin on the Overlease Library, a rolling container for donated books, tapes, magazines or anything having to do with the Civil War or even history in general. This unit will be housed at the History Center and will be opened for all to browse and borrow from during meetings or by special arrangement. While we are not ready to begin receiving donated items quite yet, you could begin to survey your collection and think about what things might be better used in this way than just sitting on your shelf at home.

Encore!

Anyone who may have missed John Crosby's presentation described above, and would like to see it in full, complete with "visuals," is invited to attend an "encore" performance at Bell Trace Senior Living Center on East Tenth Street on Thursday, March 6, at 2:30. Anyone is welcome. For directions, call Steve Rolfe at 336-0757 or Bell Trace at 332-2355.

Perryville/ Mill Springs in June

The Roundtable is putting together (we hope!) a Saturday/ Sunday excursion to the Civil War battlefield and museum at Perryville, KY, with the same combination the next day at Nancy, KY, where the Battle of Mill Springs was fought early in the war. Right now, the anticipated schedule is an early Saturday departure from Bloomington on June 14, with the afternoon and early evening in Perryville, an overnight hotel stay in nearby Danville, a short drive to Nancy the next morning with an afternoon at the battlefield and museum there, then an evening drive back home. The transportation will be carpooling with volunteers being reimbursed for mileage, meals will be on your own. At this writing, it appears hotel rooms in Danville will run around \$100 since there is a fabulous brass band festival (www.gabbf.com) in town that weekend. Total for the trip with room and gas, but without meals would run \$125-\$150, although we will make every effort to keep it as low as we can. Room sharing, if you are interested in finding a "buddy" could reduce that figure. See the enclosed flyer in the mail for more details.



GAR Badge

Next Month

Join us on March 11th at the Monroe County History Center and hear David Wiley speak on the "Grand Army of the Republic," the veterans' organization that was ubiquitous after the war and lasted well into the 20th century.

Help support the Roundtable!

April is our annual "Dues Date" but we are asking for your support now in order to help with many things, including refreshments, mailings, support to the Monroe County History Center, the Overlease Library and more. You should soon receive a regular mailing of this newsletter with a donation letter and a self-addressed envelope. Please take a minute and consider giving a little, or more, to help the Roundtable continue to bring you quality programs and events.

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Or on the web at <http://mypage.iu.edu/~rawatson/roundtable/>.