

Ghost of Trains Nos. 10 and 29

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Depending upon one's view of "big government", and all that goes with that, Virginians ought to either celebrate or mourn each year on July 16. On that date in 1790, President Washington signed the bill which authorized the selection of a site on the Potomac River as the permanent location of the U. S. Capital. If there ever was a classic case of unforeseen - yea, perhaps even unintended - consequences, this would be a great example. But let us stick to rail transportation consequences, as related to Virginia.

Washington's first railroad, the B&O, reached the capital in 1835, linking the relatively-new federal city with Baltimore. No rails crossed the Potomac River, at Washington, until Union forces laid them during the Civil War. Earlier, some Virginians sought to do so, but the Congress frowned upon their rail construction plans. Richmond-based RF&P evidenced no interest in building beyond its northern terminus at a steamboat wharf on the Potomac north of Fredericksburg. In fact, RF&P rebuffed pleas to do so, being quite content with its water connection to DC and the B&O. Only after the Pennsylvania RR muscled aside the B&O, and obtained the right to cross the River in a post-war political power play, did Virginia gain a direct *civilian* rail link to the north.

Washington and Northern Virginia were of little economic and commercial consequence to the rest of Virginia prior to the Civil War. DC's population increased as result to the War, followed by more significant increases during World Wars I and II. *All of Northern Virginia* had a population slightly less than the Richmond area *as late as 1950*. (329,720 vs. 395,308). Now, it's two+ million in NoVA to one million for RIC.

Once PRR's rails linked up with the RF&P at Quantico, and merged, there was local rail (commuter-type) service into the District from Fredericksburg and intermediate points.. By the middle of the 20th century, however, few people were using the train. The relatively new Shirley Highway (now I-95) was a dream of convenience. RF&P's last commuter trains, Nos. 10 and 29 (which made far more stops than does VRE today) were taken off around 1956-57. Within ten years, Northern Virginia people were asking for a rail alternative to their increasingly congested and slow commute. Virginia Rail Express ("VRE") was launched in 1991. Despite growing pains, VRE is judged a great success.

Last week, VRE launched its 7th morning train, a 5:05 a.m. "express" from Fredericksburg. In addition, four Amtrak morning and evening trains handle VRE passengers. The new train was flooded with passengers. It did not, however, live up to its "express" billing that morning. Rail performance ♦ reliability - remains a problem.

All of this says much about the impact upon Virginia of the federal city, "big government", population growth, sprawl, transportation planning, the importance of rail, and the challenges ahead. We will have to reflect and ponder these issues some more!

Meanwhile, we wonder what George Washington would think?

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