

# The Receding Footprint of Urban Freight Rail

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When was the last time you saw a box car, or any other rail freight car, at a business location, or industrial plant, within the core of any of our major cities, or even in the suburban areas? If one looks carefully, one might see remnants of rail track in these areas, but by and large urban freight rail has largely withdrawn, save for a few yards, such as Acca in Richmond, or Berkley, Lamberts Point, and a few others in Norfolk.

In the mid-1950's the Norfolk-Portsmouth Belt Line counted more than 100 such customers, representing about 150,000 carloads annually, and that was just the Belt Line. There were other rail freight customers in Norfolk-Portsmouth directly served by the line-haul carriers. Richmond had no Belt Line Railroad, as such, but the five railroad companies then serving Virginia's capital city had, in the aggregate, well in excess of one hundred "private sidings", most of which were in what we then called the "reciprocal switching district". In other words, those railroads placed and pulled freight cars for their competitors as well as for their own account. The annual volume of such traffic in Richmond was probably in excess of that cited above for the NPBL. Multiply these two Virginia examples by one hundred comparable, and larger, cities across the land and we are talking about many millions of carloads of cargo that went from origin to destination without touching the highway. Local distribution was of course handled by truck; local drayage it was called. We speculate that NPBL has only about a dozen major customers today; Richmond not many more in total, if any more. Now all, or virtually all, of this cargo is on the highway, often for hundreds of miles. Are we better off? Hardly! Could the outcome have been different? We doubt it; the causes were many and complex.

Business and industry fled cities in search of less expensive land, lower taxes and often for employees who would work for less. Many industries simply vanished. Consider that the NPBL once had more than fifteen fertilizer plants and about that many petroleum distributors, all rail users. Now there are but a handful. In season, Richmond saw hundreds of carloads of tobacco. Now, none! The railroads considered industrial private siding work inordinately expensive. In about 1980, a bright young marketing man at Conrail was publicly predicting that by the year 2000 the standard boxcar would have disappeared altogether in favor of "piggyback", now "Intermodal", containers that begin and end their haul most often by highway. Things did not work out as predicted, so now it is mostly the big trucks that serve widely dispersed business and industry.

Surprisingly, however, some new boxcars are still being built. They are absolute marvels of efficiency in certain applications, each capable of handling up to four times the load of a truck. And there are hundreds of acres of obsolete warehouses and under-developed land in almost every American city, capable of being rail-served still. For example, the James River (Port of Richmond) Commerce Road corridor is ripe for

redevelopment. With enlightened public policy, to encourage redevelopment, including competitive taxes, and updated infrastructure, it might be possible in some instances to bring industrial vitality back to the cities, and cargo back to the rails. A win-win! ####