

THE HOOK AND EYE: HISTORY OF A NORTH GEORGIA RAILROAD*

Bonita S. Pagel

The railroad winding through Pickens County, Georgia, has seen many changes throughout its history. The old nickname "Wooden Axle Division" apparently has faded, but the moniker "Hook & Eye" is here to stay.¹ For one hundred years this rail line has served the needs of several North Georgia industries and communities. The development of this particular railroad has historical significance for the engineering achievements alone, but this rail line is also a rare example of a mountain railroad which continues to play an active role in Georgia commerce.

The rail line originated with the incorporation of the Ellijay Rail Company through a charter granted by the Georgia State Legislature on 9 February 1854.² The investors in this narrow gauge railroad were interested in extracting ore from the copper mines of Fightington Creek on the Ocoee River. This area is part of the Tennessee Great Copper Basin. Copper ore from McCays, now known as Copper Hill, Tennessee, was placed in oxen wagons and hauled over arduous mountain trails through Ellijay, Georgia, to the nearest railroad at Dalton.³

By 1858 the route of the proposed narrow gauge rail line had been surveyed.⁴ However, the charter was to be amended for a series of name changes before construction began. Renaming under an amended charter often reflected a reorganization of stock or a change in major stockholders. On 19 December 1859, the name became the Marietta, Canton & Ellijay Rail Company. By 24

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October 1870, investors had petitioned the legislature to change the name on the charter to the Marietta & North Georgia Railroad Company,⁵ a railroad proposing to give Atlanta access to developing sections of Georgia.

Other railroads were also chartered by investors who wished to take advantage of the natural resources in the northern portion of the state. Van Wert Railroad Company's 1869 petition to the state legislature was probably typical of what the Board of Directors of the Marietta & North Georgia Railroad might have submitted:

The memorial of the Cartersville and Van Wert Railroad Company, to the Legislature of Georgia, Respectfully presents, as follows, to wit:

According to the charter granted by your Honorable body we submit this request for bond security for expansion of the Slate and Rock quarries at Van Wert. Those who refer to themselves as your memorialist are now able to develop and open vast treasures and great resources of wealth to the State. These will arise from Mines, from the Forest and from Agriculture. It will constitute a direct source of revenue for the Western & Atlantic Railroad and will also contribute to the Trade, Commerce and Growth of Atlanta. It will establish an increased valuation of land value for acreage five miles each side of the Road for the length of the line. Commercial values are projected to increase, as well as a projected population increase. This clearly benefits the state by adding to the income of the State

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through increased taxation. Products will be stimulated and brought forth. Dormant labor power of these counties will be moved up and energized. These products of labor are the only real prime wealth of a State. Hence a Nation is strong and wealthy in proportion to the products habitually brought to market.⁶

The investors in this railroad, no doubt like many others, deemed it necessary to appeal not only to the interests of the counties, but also to the pocketbooks of big business and government as well as to the preservation of the entire nation!

Even after the long delay through the years of the Civil War, the Marietta & North Georgia Railroad endured a postponement due to the unstable financial status of the post-war South. Not until 1874 did construction begin, two miles north of Marietta at the community of Elizabeth, Georgia.⁷ (Elizabeth has since been consumed by sprawling Marietta.)

The coming of the railroad to the isolated mountain communities of Pickens County helped develop local industries and gave access to the great natural resources of the area. According to Luke Tate, chosen as county historian in 1933, "the railroad gave people a contact with the outside world that the old wagon road had been inadequate to furnish."⁸

By 1884, the railroad construction crew faced an obstacle that resulted in a peculiarity of this railroad. To avoid the marshy and often flooded Talking Rock Creek in Pickens County, the contractor routed the roadbed around the creek, creating a hairpin turn, or "hook." In railroad language, the engineers created a 15-degree double reverse curve,⁹ thus accounting for half of the nickname "Hook & Eye." The "eye" would not be completed for another forty-four years.

The present community of Talking Rock sprang up just

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south of the "hook" after the railroad came through, because old Talking Rock (now the Blaine community) lay a couple of miles west of the railroad.¹⁰ Atherton Mills had operated cotton, grist, and saw mills at old Talking Rock since 1847. Before they could benefit from the railroad, Sherman's soldiers burned the mills to the ground. The old Talking Rock Cotton Factory, however, was rebuilt on the site.¹¹ After the Civil War, the Atherton brothers also built the Harmony Cotton Factory three miles south of Jasper, the county seat.

In addition to the copper mines and cotton businesses like the Athertons', the railroad served the marble industry. The Long Swamp Valley of Tate, Georgia, contains immense deposits of marble that are among the largest and finest in the world. Even though the Marietta & North Georgia was a relatively slow route, it was important in that it made the marble quarries of Pickens County more accessible.¹² On 20 July 1877, the Board of Directors passed a resolution allowing a branch road to be constructed from Tate Station to Southern Marble Company.¹³ This seven-mile rail spur is now owned and operated by the Georgia Marble Corporation. A Georgia Marble railroad foreman still runs his company locomotive, pulling hopper cars of marble products from the Marble Hill plant to the Tate Station, where switches are thrown and the cars are transferred to the main line. The Tate depot is the only depot still operated by the railroad between Marietta, Georgia, and Etowah, Tennessee. It is used for storage only, since passenger service was discontinued in 1949. Freight has always been the principal source of revenue for carriers on this line.¹⁴

As construction continued in the 1870s and 1880s, the northern terminus of the Marietta & North Georgia was extended north from Ellijay to the North Carolina state line. From Murphy Junction, the line pushed northeastward to Murphy, North

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Carolina, some thirteen miles away.

By 1886, the necessity to conform to connecting railroads prompted the expansion from a narrow gauge, three-foot-wide track, to a standard gauge, 4 ft. 8½ in., track. With the help of convict labor, a third rail was laid along the outside of the existing two, which allowed the narrow gauge engines to continue running on the track during construction. This reduced the length of time the train would be out of service. However, it also meant that the original roadbed and tighter curves tolerated by the old narrow gauge line were often not improved. This slowed the standard width locomotives that pulled longer trains. (The branch line serving Murphy was not converted from narrow gauge at this time, leaving them isolated.)¹⁵

Convict labor, used by the railroad to help defray costs, was not uncommon in these times. Convict labor was essentially free labor for the railroad, since the prisoners were not paid and the state was not compensated. A special committee was appointed by the state legislature "to examine into the right of the Marietta & North Georgia Railroad Company to receive from the state the proceeds of the hire of state convicts."¹⁶ The committee, reporting directly to the Speaker, cited Section 5, Article 4 of the Constitution of 1877 as to appropriate disposition of proceeds derived from convict labor.

In 1889, work began to connect Knoxville, Tennessee, to Atlanta through the Hiwassee River gorge. The junction with the main line was to be at Etowah, Tennessee. The owners of the Marietta & North Georgia founded a second company, Knoxville Southern, to complete the task. The problem facing the engineers and directors was how to gain the necessary altitude to reach the Copper Basin. By 1890, a switchback, which had the train reversing its direction twice, was built at Bald Mountain, Tennessee. The mountain was adorned with a gigantic "W."

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Knoxville Southern promptly consolidated under the Marietta & North Georgia name.¹⁷ A Superintendent's report, dated 30 September 1860, may provide insight into the railroader's opinion of the mechanizations of engineers:

When, if professional engineers were all dead, people would soon learn that the railroad could be better built and cheaper built without them. I know that any engineering corps, ready for the field, is an imposing sight and one, too, well calculated to awe the "common people" into the belief that without the application of the very mysterious science which they possess, a railroad never could be built. I know not why the word "science" might not as well apply to running a farm. As a class engineers certainly understand the science of spending money - habits contracted in getting their profession teach them this - there are but few railroads in the United States but what could give ample proof of this in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd mortgage bonds given to cover their estimates.¹⁸

Profitable train lengths could not negotiate the tight curves of this otherwise impressive engineering feat.

The 240 miles of track extending from Marietta to Knoxville forced trains to negotiate more than 700 curves and ascend 4,348 feet over approximately 107 inclined grades.¹⁹ This combination of tight curves and steep grades forced strict limits on freight capacity. The construction costs of laying track through mountainous terrain, as well as limited revenue, forced the Marietta & North Georgia Railway into receivership. Superintendent of the Railroad J. B. Glover of Marietta was appointed Receiver 19 January 1891. He recorded in an annual report that the books

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showing capital stock bonds, et cetera, remained in the hands of the old organization. Operating expenses and earnings were available, however. The gross earnings for the year ending 30 June 1895 were \$42,930.36. Employees and salaries based on average daily compensation were reported as follows:

General Officers	6	\$4.75
General Office Clerks	5	2.40
Station Agents	36	1.25
Enginemen	12	3.50
Firemen	12	1.35
Conductors	11	2.50
Other Trainmen	24	1.13
Machinists	2	2.50
Carpenters	2	2.00
Other Shopmen	20	.90
Section Foremen	29	1.12
Other Trackmen	116	.90
Switchmen, Flagmen, Watchmen	3	.90

Marble was by far the leader in tonnage of freight for the year. Freight and passengers were transported across one iron and five wooden bridges, as well as 200 trestles owned by the Marietta & North Georgia Railway Company. The subsidiary North Georgia Telegraph Company owned 230 miles of wire paralleling the tracks.²⁰

The Marietta & North Georgia Railway Company was bought out of bankruptcy in 1896 by New York investors who rechartered the line as the Atlanta, Knoxville & Northern Railway Company (AK&N).²¹ Until this time, the railroad had been financed by citizens of North Georgia. The stocks had sold locally, and the board members were all local men.²² The first annual

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report of the new company to the Georgia State Railroad Commissioner was for an eight-month period ending 30 June 1897. The date of organization was given as 1 November 1896, with eight stockholders. Three stockholders from the North and three from Georgia sat as the Board of Directors. Alex W. Smith, Atlanta, remained as general counsel. H. W. Oliver, Marietta, continued as Secretary and Treasurer/Auditor. Thirty thousand shares were let at \$100 par value for a total issue of \$3,000,000. No dividends were declared for the first eight months. One half of the total authorized value (\$1,500,000) was mortgaged on 1 December 1896, at a rate of 5%, not due until 1946 (a 50-year note!).

During this transition period, assets were undoubtedly reviewed by the new Board. The U.S. Mail provided a handsome reimbursement of \$16,130.44. Other functions were liquidated. The express service was turned over to Southern Express. The telegraph service was to be sold to Western Union as of 11 February 1898. The 75.5 mile spur to Murphy was finally widened to standard gauge at a cost of \$9,571.71. Even though a total of \$75,913.97 was spent on improvements, eight trainmen and four passengers were injured in derailments. Passengers accounted for \$39,517.79 of revenue, on average traveling 27 miles each, while freight brought in \$112,500.06, with an average ton being carried 89 miles. Marble continued to be the largest user at a weight of 14,093 tons.

Records further show one poor soul was killed on the tracks. Later, he was determined to have been "intoxicated, as well as trespassing."²³ The annual report made no mention of financial compensation for the man killed. The Gilmer County paper in Ellijay reported on 20 November 1896 that citizens thwarted attempts by the AK&N to fence the right of way in Gilmer County.²⁴ Since \$942.05 was paid out by the railroad for livestock

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killed in an eight-month period, perhaps the railroad saw a valid need for the fence.

During the first two years in control, the major stock holder and President of the Board of Directors for AK&N, was plagued by the costly inefficiency of the switchbacks at Bald Mountain. He borrowed a Louisville & Nashville engineer and put him to the task of finding a solution to this stumbling block. In 1898, a railroad engineering phenomenon known as the Great Hiwassee Loop was completed, the "eye" of the old "Hook & Eye!" The loop measures some 8,000 feet in length, rising 426 feet in less than six miles, with a ruling grade of less than 1.5%, that is, less than a 1.5 foot vertical rise for 100 feet in track.²⁵ Now billed as the "Hiwassee Route" on an AK&N timetable effective 29 January 1900, the trip of 204 miles from Marietta to Knoxville took nine and one-half hours.²⁶ This was a full hour less than the timetable effective 8 February 1891.²⁷ Elimination of the switchback curves, which restricted train length, not only allowed for increased revenues but also permitted an increase in speed.

On 10 March 1902, "Old Reliable," the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, secured a line of its own between Cincinnati, Ohio, and Atlanta by purchasing a majority of capital stock in the Atlanta, Knoxville & Northern Railway. At that time, the trackage of the AK&N extended from Marietta, Georgia, to Knoxville, Tennessee. Annual reports continued to be submitted under the AK&N name through 1904. Annual reports for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad date from 1905 through 1914. Apparently the name change did not occur until after 30 June 1904. Marble remained a major commodity, amounting to 50,689 tons of freight that year. However, it was surpassed by 70,556 tons of ore and 57,620 tons of lumber. Notably, "Stone, Sand, and other like articles" had increased from 122 tons in 1897 to 43,411 tons by 1904. This category reflected the new markets for crushed marble

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and calcium products also produced by the Georgia Marble Company. The Louisville & Nashville Railroad subsequently moved the mechanics shop from Blue Ridge, Georgia, to Etowah, Tennessee, followed shortly by the transfer of divisional headquarters from Marietta to Etowah.²⁸

The "Hook & Eye" has gone through several take-overs in the days since L&N ownership--Family Lines in the 1960s, Seaboard System in the 1970s, CSX in the 1980s.²⁹ The Marietta to Knoxville route became fragmented in 1990. The track from Marietta to Tate was purchased by Wilds Pierce, President and part owner of Georgia Northeastern Railroad (GNRR). The track from Tate to Ellijay is leased from CSX by GNRR. This short line, one of nineteen still operating in Georgia, follows the contour of the land as it did a century ago, 174 curves each day at no more than 10 miles per hour.³⁰

The Georgia Northeastern does not go to Ellijay anymore. The mill sending all those tons of lumber down the line has closed. The GNRR reverses direction at the Georgia Marble Whitestone plant just north of Talking Rock. New, straight track now bypasses the notorious "hook." The switch stands as a reminder, though the old track has been pulled up. That narrow gauge, 180-degree curved roadbed can still be seen for the price of a short walk.

The State of Georgia rail bank owns the track between Ellijay and Blue Ridge. It will remain out of service but preserved should demand return. CSX still owns the track from Blue Ridge to Etowah, Tennessee. The portion from Blue Ridge to the state line is out of service. The good news is that CSX trains operate regularly up, over, around, and down the "eye" at Bald Mountain. There is still a need and a profit in hauling sulfuric acid north out of Copper Hill, Tennessee.³¹

The construction of this North Georgia railroad was

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significant to the economic development of the region and remains so today. From opposite ends of the line, commerce is carried forward on a daily basis. Future industry promises to keep rail service through Pickens County active for a long time to come. A recent front page article in the local newspaper announces a major corporation's plans "to open a new premium white calcium carbonate mine adjacent to Georgia Marble Company's operation in Marble Hill."³² What but the railroad could transport to market the initial production of 400,000 tons of ground limestone products per year? All of this development has been possible because "a trunk line extended into isolated areas of moderately dense settlement"³³ in the mountains of North Georgia, a railroad called the "Hook & Eye."

NOTES

1. Franklin Garrett, interview by author, 25 October 1994, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

2. Edward W. Hines, *Corporate History of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company and Roads in Its System* (Louisville, 1905), 118.

3. Kincaid Herr, *Louisville & Nashville Railroad 1850-1959* (Louisville, 1943), 93.

4. News clippings of the T.,G.& N.C. Mountains Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society, Inc., Blue Ridge, Georgia, in the possession of Don Lodge, Big Canoe, Georgia.

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5. Hines, 119.
6. Memorial of the Cartersville and Van Wert Railroad Company to the Legislature of Georgia, 1869, R.G. 17-2-1, Box 2, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta.
7. Right of Way and Track Map, 30 June 1917, Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company, 1-2, in the files of Georgia Northeastern Railroad, Marietta, Georgia.
8. Luke E. Tate, *History of Pickens County* (Atlanta, 1935), 248.
9. *Ibid.*, 81.
10. Tate, 247.
11. George Ward, *The Annals of Upper Georgia Centered in Gilmer County* (Carrollton, Georgia, 1965), 25.
12. Raymond Wallace Stanley, "The Railroad Patterns of Atlanta" (MBA diss., University of Chicago, 1947), 73, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia.
13. Hines, 122.
14. Richard L. Hillman, Marketing and Sales Manager for Georgia Northeastern Railroad, Marietta, Georgia, interview by author, 4 November 1994.
15. Herr, 93.
16. Special Committee Report to Georgia State Legislature, undated, R.G. 17-2-1, Box 1, Georgia Department of Archives & History, Atlanta, Georgia.

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17. News clippings, National Railway Historical Society.
18. Superintendent's Report, Western & Atlantic Railroad Valuations, 1860, R.G. 17-2-1, Vol. 1, Georgia Department of Archives & History, Atlanta, Georgia.
19. Atlanta, Knoxville & Northern Railway Company, Annual Report to the Railroad Commissioner of the State of Georgia, 1904, R.G. 17-2-9, Box 5, Georgia Department of Archives & History, Atlanta, Georgia.
20. Marietta & North Georgia Railroad Company, Annual Report to the Railroad Commissioner of the State of Georgia, 1895, R. G. 17-2-9, Box 26, Georgia Department of Archives & History, Atlanta, Georgia.
21. Atlanta, Knoxville & Northern Railway Company, Annual Report to the Railroad Commissioner of the State of Georgia, 1897, R. G. 17-2-9, Box 5, Georgia Department of Archives & History, Atlanta, Georgia.
22. M&NG Annual Report, 1895.
23. AK&N Annual Report, 1897.
24. Ward, 26.
25. News clippings, National Railway Historical Society.
26. Timetable, 29 January 1900, Atlanta, Knoxville & Northern Railway, in the possession of Franklin Garrett, Atlanta Historical Society, Atlanta, Georgia.

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27. Timetable, 8 February 1891, Marietta & North Georgia Railway, photocopy in the possession of Don Lodge, Big Canoe, Georgia.

28. AK&N Annual Report, 1904.

29. Hillman, Interview.

30. Clipping, *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, 15 Oct. 1992.

31. Hillman, Interview.

32. *Pickens County Progress* (Jasper, Georgia), 17 Nov. 1994.

33. Stanley, 73.