

PROSPERITY CAME TO PITTSBORO ON THE TRAIN

by Fred J. Vatter
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The poor condition of roads in Chatham had Pittsboro functioning as an almost self-reliant country village for a good part of the nineteenth century. Any freight coming from Wilmington, on the coast, traveled by boat up the Cape Fear River to Fayetteville, and then had to be carted 70 miles or so to Pittsboro, when the roads were passable.

In 1850 the Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company was formed in the hope of bringing steamboats 100 miles upstream from Fayetteville. By 1856 some 19 dams and 22 locks had been built, but the seasonal floods which had long played havoc with the water-powered mills in the Piedmont did the same with the company's locks and dams. In 1853 the Western Railroad was chartered and extended a line to Egypt (now Cumnock) to service the area's coal and iron mines. It was completed in 1862, with its terminal only about 12 miles from Pittsboro. Still, all merchandise had to be carted from there to Pittsboro over sometimes impassable roads.

The economic health of Pittsboro was given a major boost in 1885 with the formation of the Pittsboro Railroad Company to build a branch line connecting the town with the main line of the Raleigh and Augusta Railroad at Moncure. Township bonds furnished \$10,000 in start-up capital and local citizens invested another \$5,000. Prison labor was hired from the State Penitentiary for roadbed construction. Work started on November 16, 1885 and by eleven months later grading was almost complete and appreciative local citizens gave a dinner for the convicts who labored so hard on the roadbed. The first passenger train reached Pittsboro on December 20, 1886. The route was about 10½ miles long. The official celebration of the railroad's completion was not held until the following May, perhaps because the winter weather's effect on the roads would have made travel to the festivities from the surrounding countryside almost impossible.

What a celebration it was! A train of ten cars came from Raleigh, through Moncure and down the new branch to Pittsboro. Crowds had gathered at the depot two hours before the train was scheduled to arrive. People were backed up into all the surrounding streets, their numbers estimated at between 2000 and 4000. The celebration was held at Kelvin Grove on West Salisbury Street, on a hill covered with ancient oak trees. The porch of the residence was used as a stand for the speakers and honored guests. Three brass bands from Durham, Raleigh, and Siler City entertained the crowd, and drills were performed by the Durham Light Infantry and the Governor's Guard of Raleigh. There were many speeches: a welcome by Henry A. London, President of the Pittsboro Railroad, followed by a response from Major R. S. Tucker, a director of the Raleigh & Augusta Air Line Railroad. Other speakers included the President of the Directors of the North Carolina State Penitentiary (whose laborers were used), and a

Captain C. B. Denson, Headmaster of the Pittsboro Scientific Academy, who presented Henry London with a gold headed cane. Following the ceremony a meal was served to 2,500 people and a grand ball was held in the railroad's warehouse. The huge crowds at this event were apparently orderly and well-behaved, prompting an out-of-town visitor to write to Henry A. London ".....I am persuaded that Pittsboro deserves her reputation for refined hospitality. The State is far richer for having brought such clever, nice people closer to the balance of mankind."

Only four other events in Pittsboro's history attracted similar large crowds: The March 1890 hanging of James P. Davis (alias Shackelford) for the axe murder of John D. Horton, the August 1907 unveiling of the Confederate monument at the court house, in September 1922 when electricity came to town, and in December 1938 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited briefly.

The arrival of the railroad opened a period of prosperity and building in Pittsboro. A notable example is the arrival of Bennet Nooe, Jr., a Lexington manufacturer of shuttle blocks for the textile trade. Hearing about the railroad, he traveled 80 miles by horse and buggy to inspect Pittsboro. He promptly noted the abundance of dogwood and persimmon trees as raw material for his shuttle blocks and bought land just north of the railroad terminal, where he established the Pittsboro Shuttle Mill. He soon expanded to a sawmill, planing mill, and brick manufacturing. Subsequently he became a wholesaler of manufactured lumber and an important builder of homes throughout the Pittsboro area.

In the mid-twentieth century the very roads that encouraged the formation of the Pittsboro Railroad had become hard-surfaced and part of an expanding network, which presented serious competition to the trains. The flexibility of moving freight door to door by truck and passengers by Trailways bus were tough to match.

Finally, in the mid 1980's the branch line to Pittsboro, which had been taken over by the Seaboard Railroad, discontinued operations. The tracks which had once crossed East Street, ending near Salisbury Street, have been torn up. Pittsboro's citizens no longer hear train whistles or the clickity-clack of wheels passing over rail joints. Now the only reminders of the rail line which once gave an important economic boost to the town are some rusty rails lying in the grass near Salisbury Street.

See map on next page, which shows old homes and structures in and around Pittsboro during the period of 1787-1900. Reprinted from *Bygones and Survivors: Old Homes and Structures in and around Pittsboro 1787-1900*, by John Houghton London, 1984.

