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PIONEER FLORIDA

by T. FREDERICK DAVIS

The First Railroads

Practical operation of railroads in the United States began in 1827, when the Quincy (Mass.) Rail Road, three miles in length, started operation in April or May. This was followed immediately by the opening of a nine mile line at Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania. Soon afterwards preparations were made for the construction of several other lines of railroad, the longest and most important of which was the Baltimore and Ohio Railway. Much publicity was given the B & O, resulting in an increasing shift of transportation interest from canals to railroads generally. By the end of 1834, before Florida's first railroad construction began, there were in operation or nearing completion not less than sixteen railroads in the United States, with a combined trackage of 1613 miles; a number of them had supplanted their original horse power with steam locomotives. The foregoing is derived from *Niles' Weekly Register*, of Baltimore, 1827-1835.

Meanwhile, the interest in railroads reached Florida, the first legislative action on the subject being a resolution introduced by Florida's delegate in Congress, Joseph M. White, on April 15, 1830, for a survey and estimate of cost of a "Rail-way" from Augusta, Georgia, to St. Marks, Florida, as an extension of the Charleston Rail-way to the Gulf of Mexico. The resolution failed of adoption by Congress; but this did not kill the interest of Floridians in railroads, for before 1835 six charters had been granted by the Florida legislature for the construction of railroads within the limits of the

Territory. Of these, only one progressed beyond the paper stage—the Tallahassee-St. Marks railroad, which was eventually completed. Though this was the first railroad to start construction, it was not the first completed in Florida.

St. Joseph-Lake Wimico Rail Road

Established on St. Joseph's Bay in the forepart of 1835, St. Joseph was a break-away from the town of Apalachicola. In every sense it was a "boom" town—the "Cripple Creek" of Florida, until a yellow fever epidemic and a hurricane wiped it off the map after an existence of six or seven years. At one time it was one of the largest and most prosperous towns in Florida.

Among the first conceptions was a bid for the business, especially cotton, of the back country contiguous to the Apalachicola river, to be accomplished by digging a canal, eight miles in length, to Lake Wimico, an arm of the Apalachicola, thus providing a direct water route to St. Joseph, which in turn would furnish a deep-water outlet to the Gulf of Mexico. A company was organized and a charter was granted by the legislature to "The Lake Wimico and St. Joseph's Canal Company," approved February 14, 1835. This company was composed of Robert Beveridge, Edward J. Hardin, J. C. Maclay, James D. Bullock, E. J. Wood, David Webster, Wm. G. Porter, Thomas Penny, R. C. Adams, Wm. D. Price, Cyrus Dykman, J. G. Floyd, H. Hawley, O. C. Raymond, James Black, Thomas Bertram, John Jenkins, Oren Marsh, James Y. Smith, George S. Hawkins, John D. Roland, and James Evans.

Suddenly changing their plans for a canal to a railroad and anticipating the approval of the next legislature for the change, the company proceeded with the building of the railroad, and it was well

under way when the authority was granted by an amending act to the original charter, approved January 14, 1836.

An advertisement in the Tallahassee *Floridian* of September 5, 1835, is the earliest notice we have found bearing on the construction of the St. Joseph-Lake Wimico railroad. J. D. and W. Gray, contractors for building the railroad, advertised for 500 laborers and 200 carpenters to "work on the Tallahassee-St. Marks and the St. Joseph-Lake Wimico" railroads. Wages offered for laborers were \$20 to \$30 a month, and for carpenters \$35 to \$50 a month, with found. The advertisement was carried in every issue of the *Floridian* until November 7, 1835.

In the absence of any definite record, we may assume that actual work on the St. Joseph railroad began sometime in the fall of 1835; and the surmise is strengthened by an incident at St. Marks in the following December, when "103 Irish laborers from the St. Joseph's rail road" went to St. Marks, probably got drunk and proceeded to paint the town red. After an hour's rioting, they were subdued by about 40 citizens aided by crews from the shipping in the port.¹

Work on the St. Joseph railroad appears to have progressed without serious delays. Early in March 1836 "The railroad from Bayou Columbus to this place [St. Joseph], is now completed, or is so far done as to enable cars to cross from one depot to the other, and is open for the transportation of merchandise. Heavy shipments of goods have been ordered from New York, New Orleans, and elsewhere to this city, for the interior merchants, and contrary to the expectation of many, it is now well

1. *Niles Weekly Register*, Jan. 16, 1836, p. 337.

ascertained that most of the spring and summer business will be transacted here. We also learn that the steamers Reindeer, Hiperion, and several others on the river [Apalachicola] are to commence their trips from the depot to Columbus [Georgia] in a few days, and will discontinue their trips to Apalachicola [town] entirely. This rail road was the last one chartered by the Legislative council, and is the first in operation in the Territory. [!]"² Apparently settling the question as to the first rail-road in operation in Florida.

The formal opening of the St. Joseph-Lake Wimico railroad probably took place on Thursday, April 14, 1836: "We understand that the St. Joseph Railroad will commence operations on the 14 April. A steam boat chartered by Mr. Gray [the contractor] will leave St. Marks on the 12th [April], with a party of ladies and gentlemen [of Tallahassee], who are desirous of being present on that occasion." Upon their return to Tallahassee "the ladies and gentlemen" published a card of thanks "to the captain of the steamer *Arab*, who took them to the opening of the St. Joseph-Lake Wimico Rail Road."³

Horse power was evidently used in the beginning, for it was not until the following September that we have specific mention of a locomotive: "*Locomotives in Florida* - On Monday, the 5th inst. [September, 1836], a train of twelve cars containing upwards of 300 passengers passed over the railroad, connecting the flourishing town of St. Joseph with the Apalachicola River. The trip, a distance of eight miles, was performed in the short space of twenty-five minutes. The engineer is confident, from the superiority of the road and engine, that

2. Pensacola *Gazette*, March 19, 1836, quoting St. Joseph *Telegraph* of late date.

3. Tallahassee *Floridian*, March 26 and April 23, 1836.

the route can be accomplished in eight minutes." ⁴
This was the first railroad locomotive in Florida.

Tallahassee-St. Marks Rail Road

In 1831 and again in 1832 charters were granted by the Florida Legislative Council authorizing the building of a railroad from Tallahassee to St. Marks, a distance of about 23 miles. The result was agitation without action, which induced a third charter, approved February 10, 1834, incorporating the Tallahassee Rail Road Company, to build a railroad from Tallahassee to St. Marks or other point on the St. Marks river.

In June 1834 the entire stock of \$100,000 for building the road had been subscribed, and on the 27th of that month the first formal meeting of the company was held and directors elected. These were Richard K. Call, (elected president at a meeting the next day), Ben Chaires, Willis Alston, William Maner, William Kerr, and Romeo Lewis. Lieut. George W. Long, U. S. Engineers, was appointed engineer of road construction. ⁵

Unfortunately, and strangely too, very little contemporaneous data have been preserved on the structural progress of this railroad; in fact, so far as known, the main source now available are items in the local weekly newspaper Tallahassee *Floridian*, and these are few and far between.

4. James O. Knauss in *Fla. Hist. Soc. Quarterly*, V.5, 1927, p. 183 quoting Savannah *Georgian* of Sept. 24, 1836.

In 25th Cong. 3rd sess. H. Rep. doc. 21, Dec. 13, 1838, is a report dated Oct. 25, 1838, of G. J. Floyd, collector of customs for the Apalachicola district, listing all steam engines in the district. There were two locomotives on the St. Joseph & Lake Wimico Rail Road, with names **St. Joseph** and **Wimico** (all locomotives were named at that period). The **St. Joseph**, constructed in 1836, had been in use two years. The **Wimico**, built in 1837, had been in use 18 months. Both were built by M. W. Baldwin. Both were listed: "power of engines in horses, 12."

5. Tallahassee *Floridian*, June 28, 1834.

According to an article on Tallahassee in the *Floridian* of August 1, 1835: ". . . The most important work, however, and that which will benefit the country most, is the Rail Road now, in progress from Tallahassee to St. Marks, or some point nearer deep water. The work was begun sometime last January [1835], with 40 or 50 hands ; but is now under contract with Messrs. John D. and William Gray, of Columbia, South Carolina, who are considered to be the most able and experienced contractors in the Southern Country. Thirteen miles of this Rail Road, it is expected, will be completed and put in operation with ten Burthen Cars and two Passenger Cars, by the first day of January next [1836], and the whole road from Tallahassee, to St. Marks, will be completed by the first day of June, 1836. The work is now progressing with despatch, under the immediate superintendence of Mr. John D. Gray, and Mr. [L. W.] Dubois as Engineer. "

It might be inferred from the foregoing that the work on the railroad between January and June or July, 1835, was attempted locally without contract; that under this arrangement it did not progress satisfactorily, and for that reason it was decided to call in the Gray company to take over the job. We have already noted the contractor's advertisement of September-November, 1835, for laborers.

Of the subsequent work on the railroad there is no detailed record. That there were unforeseen and vexatious delays cannot be doubted, for at the end of three years after the work was begun in January, 1835, the entire line from Tallahassee to St. Marks had not been completed. It is likely, however, that a section of it, perhaps half, was put in use in the meantime, with mule-drawn cars. But

this is only inference, for it is not until late in 1837 that we again pick up the record thread of the road's activities.

A news item in the Tallahassee *Floridian* of December 30, 1837, says: "The Tallahassee Rail Road Company have recently procured a locomotive to run on the road, in consequence of the increased business in transportation. We understand the engine has made a trip or two and performs very well. We regret, however, that on starting from the upper depot [Tallahassee] on Thursday last, the cap of the boiler exploded with a tremendous report, but fortunately no one was injured by the accident. We are informed there was a defect in the workmanship, the iron being too thin and a small fracture inadvertently left in the cap. It will be repaired in a few days."

Two items in the *Floridian* subsequently suggest that the engine might have been procured to inaugurate the completion of the railroad to the St. Marks terminus. An advertisement of Thomas Randall on land matters, dated January 13, 1838, incidentally stated: "The Rail Road from Tallahassee to St. Marks is now near its completion." In the *Floridian* of April 28, 1838: "The sale of lots in the new town of Port Leon [near St. Marks] on the St. Marks River takes place on Thursday next [May 3] . . . The cars will run free between this city [Tallahassee] and St. Marks on that day."

If these statements were literally true, then the Tallahassee railroad to St. Marks was completed sometime between January 13, and May 3, 1838. Since Port Leon was the child of the railroad it would have been appropriate to withhold the formal opening of the railroad for a double celebration on May 3, 1838, when the town lots were placed on the market; they did things that way in those days.