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The Florida, Atlantic and Gulf Central Railroad

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THE FLORIDA, ATLANTIC AND GULF CENTRAL R. R.
THE FIRST RAILROAD IN JACKSONVILLE
by PAUL E. FENLON

Though the factors responsible for the failure of Florida to experience the rapid economic development which took place in the vast western areas of the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century are numerous and diverse, lack of adequate railroad transportation, certainly until the 1880's, stands out as one of the most important.

Midway in the nineteenth century there was not in operation a single mile of railroad in the entire State of Florida.¹ Furthermore, the development of railroad transportation facilities that did take place during most of the remainder of the century was sporadic and relatively unplanned. It came, primarily, in response to an extremely liberal State policy that involved the usage of State credit and the granting of huge amounts of free land.

Florida of 1850 was divided into two quite distinct regions. The northern third of the State, with its great cotton plantations and large number of slaves, was part of the "Old South," while the rest of Florida was frontier territory, with widely scattered small settlements, a very few small towns or villages, and relatively little agricultural and commercial activity. An editorial that appeared in a newspaper of the period expressed the great need of the southern part of the State:

The Southern portion of Florida is almost a *terra incognita*, so far as its resources, advantages, and real importance, in an agricultural and commercial aspect are concerned . . . The only thing requisite to make South Florida at once rich and populous is to open . . . means of communication-to render safe and commodious the access to and egress from every portion of the country.²

1. Letter from U. S. Senator David L. Yulee, an authority on the subject, published in the Jacksonville *Times-Union* May 23, 1886. Horses furnished the motive power for the Tallahassee-St. Marks R. R. (1836) during much of its precarious existence.

2. Editorial in the Jacksonville *Florida News* October 30, 1855.

The coming of the railroads helped to make northern and southern Florida a more integrated and homogeneous economic unit. They were instrumental in opening up the vast region of Central Florida, bringing Northern capitalists and capital, and both white and negro settlers into the region. They made possible a constant flow of inward bound and outward bound goods. In sum, the railroads aided immeasurably in the establishment of a more firm economic base for the State.

One of the several railroads of importance to the development of the relatively undeveloped parts of the State was the Florida, Atlantic & Gulf Central. During its turbulent life it suffered many of the setbacks which the entire State was forced to undergo. In fact, the F.A. & G.C.'s history may be cited as a reasonably valid account of the vicissitudes which accompanied the struggles of Florida to achieve economic growth and at least a semblance of stability in the hectic periods of just before and shortly after the Civil War.

Dr. A. S. Baldwin, a pioneer member of the medical profession in Duval County and an outstanding civic leader of Jacksonville ³, was largely responsible for the early organization, planning, and construction of the Florida, Atlantic & Gulf Central, which was built from Jacksonville to Alligator (Lake City). He, in 1855, assumed leadership in the first effective financing of the road. Financial support was given by private individuals, the State, the city of Jacksonville, and the county of Columbia (in which Alligator was located). In order to "commence operations," Dr. Baldwin and his associates thought that \$250,000 would be needed.

A majority of the voters of Jacksonville, on May 15, 1855, supported an issuance of \$50,000 in municipal bonds, with the proceeds to be used to purchase capital stock in the company. They believed that the railroad would help Jacksonville to become a great center of commercial activity. ⁴

3. Merritt, *A Century of Medicine in Jacksonville and Duval County*. (University of Florida Press, 1949, chap. ii).

4. Jacksonville, *Florida Republican* June 14, 1855.

The citizens of Columbia county responded favorably to pleas that:

. . . this is no private enterprise, to be governed and guided by selfish or sinister motives . . . This is emphatically an age of progress and improvement - other States are pressing forward - let us enter the arena and struggle for the prize. . . success will attend our efforts . . . wealth and prosperity will flow in . . . happy influences will surround us . . . we shall become . . . justly proud of our enterprise and our State . . . let each contribute his much or his mite and the work is accomplished. ⁵

A majority of them voted to authorize the County Commissioners to issue \$100,000 in bonds, and, as in the case of Jacksonville's bond issuance, the proceeds were to be invested in capital stock of the railroad company. ⁶

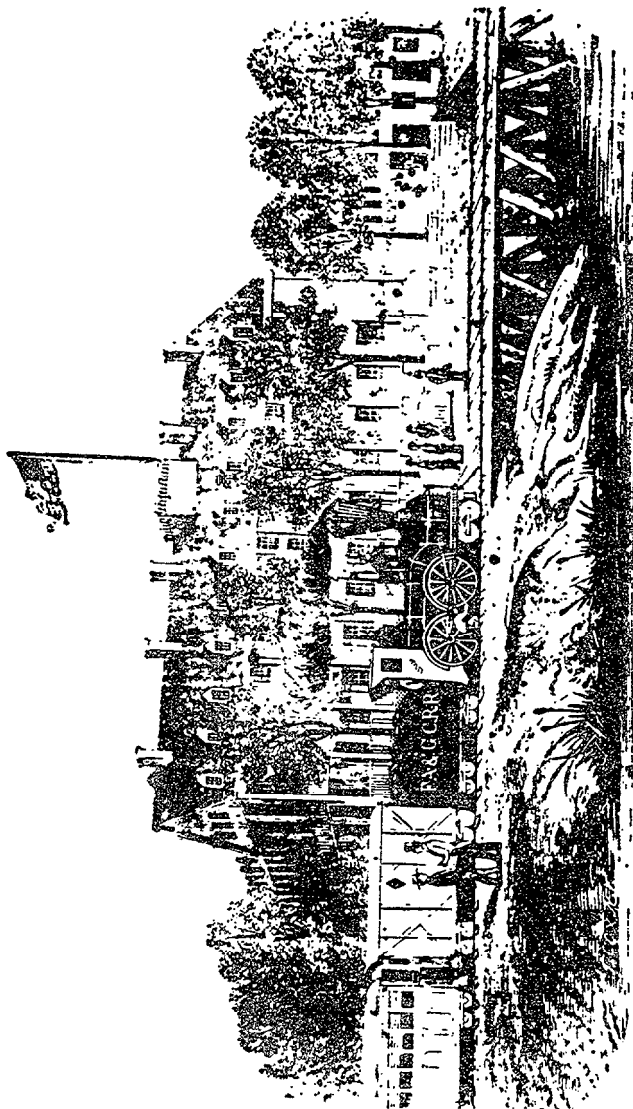
The State, through the medium of the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund, offered further financial aid. ⁷ The Board was organized on January 18, 1855, and the F.A. & G.C. was one of the first railroad companies to apply to it for subsidization. The Trustees of the Fund had agreed to allow new railroads the privilege of issuing \$10,000 in bonds for each mile of every twenty miles of roadbed that was "continuously graded and furnished with crossties." In the event of default in the payment of interest by a railroad company, the State assumed final responsibility for meeting the payments due on the bonds. The railroad companies, however, had to agree to pay into a special

5. Letter of J. P. Sanderson and T. E. Buckman to the citizens of Columbia County, *ibid.* June 21, 1855.

6. *Ibid.* July 4, 1855. In the same issue of the *Republican* is a letter from M. Whit Smith of Alligator in which he says: "Old Columbia has spoken, and her decision is in favor of progress. Official returns are not in, but enough is known to give us a majority of at least 100, and perhaps more . . . The friends of the road worked like men and have triumphed."

7. "At the last session of the legislature, a scheme for the promotion of internal improvements was elaborated, chiefly through the instrumentality of Mr. Yulee, which is eminently calculated to aid the construction of railroads, but not to stimulate their over-construction, nor to render them a burden upon the finances of the State." *Florida News* September 22, 1855.

**JUDSON HOUSE, JACKSONVILLE, FLA.,
DANIEL DAY, Proprietor.**



(Contemporaneous originals are in the library of the Florida Historical Society)

The above House having been thoroughly repaired
renovated and fitted up throughout with all the conveniences
and comforts of Southern Hotels, is now ready for the
reception of Permanent and Transient Boarders. It is elegantly located
in one of the pleasantest parts of the town, and directly
in view of the St. John's River (one of the finest in
the South), upon which a view of its glassy surface—
bordered with magnificent scenery—is seen for miles around;
also, in close proximity to the Charleston and Savannah
Steamers Wharves, and the Florida, Atlantic and Gulf
Central Rail Roads—Terminus.

December 1st, 1859..

O. L. KEENE, Proprietor
C. F. FROST, Agent

Sinking Fund of the Internal Improvement Fund an annual payment of one per cent of the total amount of the bond issuances. Failure on the part of the company to pay interest or make its required payment into the Sinking Fund was supposed to result in the sale of its assets by the Trustees, as the Internal Improvement Fund held a first mortgage on every company aided by it. Further aid for the construction of new railroads was to be furnished by the State, through the Trustees, by the grant of alternate sections of State lands to a width of six miles on either side of a new railroad.⁸ In the case of the F.A. & G.C., it was originally estimated that the State grant would amount to about 200,000 acres.⁹

The Town Council of Jacksonville gave the railroad a thirty-five year exemption "from taxation for Corporation purposes," along with a "free right of way" for a general depot and wharf for the same period of time. Also, the "free and perpetual right of way" for any railroad tracks that might be "needed" was granted to the company by the Town Council.¹⁰

With these indications of present and future aid, the Board of Directors of the company, on July 19, 1855, took specific action aimed at getting the sixty mile long railroad built. Dr. Baldwin, president of the company, was joined by J. S. Sammis, T. E. Buckman, H. A. Timanus, J. M. Baker, and J. P. Sanderson, fellow directors of the company, in the appointment of F. F. L'Engle as engineer "to take charge of the preliminary survey of the route from Jacksonville to Alligator."¹¹

Though the preliminary survey was completed by early September,¹² the company was unable to raise enough cash to push forward with the actual construction of the roadbed until March of 1856.¹³ In the meantime, the Town Council, of which Dr.

8. Laws of Florida, Chapter 610, No. 1, "An Act to Provide for and Encourage a Liberal System of Internal Improvements in this State," sections 8 & 15 (approved by the Governor January 6, 1855).

9. *Florida Republican* June 21, 1855.

10. *Ibid.* June 14, 1855.

11. *Ibid.* July 28, 1855.

12. *Ibid.* Sept. 13, 1855.

13. *Ibid.* March 13, 1856.

Baldwin was a member, decreed that the property owners of Jacksonville should be required to pay a special railroad tax sufficient "to pay the semiannual interest on . . . the bonds . . . issued in payment of the . . . Town subscription . . . to the capital stock."¹⁴

Progress on the preparation of the roadbed was exceedingly slow. The Board of Directors of the company had to report, in June of 1856, that not quite nine miles of roadbed had been made ready for rails. Somewhat ruefully the Board also reported that:

Most of those appealed to for aid . . . avowed their good will to the enterprise, . . . but could not be induced to contribute toward its prosecution unless positive assurance could be given in advance, that . . . it would without fail be completed.

. . . it is not possible always to convert Bonds and Lands into cash as it may be required without a sacrifice . . . the Board . . . deemed it a . . . prudent and safe course to take a longer time for . . . completion, until October, 1858.

An immediate sale of Columbia county and Jacksonville bonds cannot be counted on, because there is little capital out of the legitimate business operations of the country that can be spared for this purpose.¹⁵

The directors were greatly encouraged however, by a Congressional grant, in May of 1856, of 120 sections of land for every twenty miles of road. Senator David L. Yulee, a pioneer railroad builder in Florida, had exercised his influence in order to secure favorable Congressional action on his proposal that such grants be made.

The directors totaled up the "means" of the company as \$1,330,000. Of this sum "Private cash subscriptions (reliable)"

14. *Ibid.* Nov. 29, 1855.

15. "Some of our citizens are taking sub-contracts, which we are pleased to see, as evincing an investing interest on the part of our people in the enterprise." *Florida News* April 5, 1859.

amounted to only \$20,000. \$40,000 was in "Stock paid to Contractors for work." And they figured that the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund would furnish them with "guaranteed" bonds totaling \$600,000 (\$10,000 for each mile of completed roadbed), plus 200,000 acres of land which they expected would be worth at least \$250,000. The Congressional grant they estimated as 200,000 acres, worth another \$250,000. Of the \$1,330,000 "means" available, or to become available for the construction of the railroad, \$750,000 depended on the successful sale of bonds of Jacksonville, Columbia county and the State, and \$500,000 was supposed to come from the sale of the estimated 400,000 acres of land to be given by the State and U. S. governments.

Anticipated expenditures of \$1,000,000 included \$240,000 for "grading and cross-ties," \$600,000 for "iron and equipments," and \$40,000 for "engineering salaries and contingencies."

The directors, A. S. Baldwin, J. P. Sanderson, A. M. Read, Theo. Hartridge, Jas. M. Baker, J. D. Hart, T. E. Buckman, J. S. Sammis, and P. Moody, concluded their report in an optimistic fashion:

The great commercial advantages possessed by the St. Johns River will create an important depot of a diversified trade from the Peninsula, which will be distributed to the North and West, and will invite to it exchange from all directions, which exchange must be mainly effected through our Road . . . A new era has been introduced, dating from the commencement of the construction of our Rail-Road system . . . our part is the key to the whole system, and without its completion the balance would be comparatively worthless.¹⁶

The attempt to get the roadbed to Alligator completed continued to be both difficult and disappointing. The one dollar a day pay for members of work crews that sometimes numbered one hundred and fifty men constituted a heavy drain on slender financial resources. It became increasingly difficult to pay for

16. *Florida Republican* issues of August 6, 13, 20, 1856.

construction through reliance on expectations of vast monetary returns and promises of future prosperity for the entire region.

Colonel J. P. Sanderson, member of the Board of Directors throughout the earliest stages of the railroad's development, assumed a more and more active part in the leadership of the concern. He became the dominant force behind the company's activities, replacing Dr. Baldwin as president in 1857. Sanderson, one of the leading lawyers and public speakers in Jacksonville, employed both of these skills in behalf of the railroad. He was very successful in dealing with the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund ¹⁷, and despite the failure to progress in the construction of the railroad as anticipated, he managed to keep the company in existence. A yellow fever epidemic in 1857, the complications involved in the purchase of iron from England and periodic shortages of labor—all hampered efforts to push forward toward the completion of the road to Alligator.

Iron was laid from Jacksonville to Baldwin early in March of 1858. The *Alligator Independent Press* reported, however, that the "contractor for laying the iron . . . from Jacksonville to Baldwin was accidentally killed by being struck with a bar of iron . . . just as the last piece was being laid that completed his contract." ¹⁸ Train service for freight and passengers was then instituted between Jacksonville and Baldwin, and by November of 1858 the entire grading of the road from Jacksonville to Alligator had been completed: ¹⁹

Work on the railroad continued throughout 1859. Noteworthy events of the year included the completion of the first twenty-five miles of track in June, ²⁰ the purchase of the locomotive "Jacksonville" to help handle the "rapidly increasing amount of freight that is passing to and fro," ²¹ and the installation of the fiftieth mile of track in November. ²²

17. The Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund for February 10, 1858 contain the statement that the treasurer of the board was authorized to buy \$45,000 of bonds of the F. A. & G. C. R.R. at ninety cents on the dollar.

18. Tallahassee, *Floridian and Journal* March 19, 1858.

19. *Ibid.* Nov. 27, 1858.

20. *Ibid.* June 4, 1859.

21. Jacksonville *Standard* Oct. 13, 1859.

Completion of the railroad seemed assured in January, 1860, as the last 1000 tons of iron for it arrived from England.²³ Plans for celebrating the completion of the road were made in both Lake City (Alligator) and Jacksonville while work on the installation of track was intensified.

Finally, approximately five years after the financing arrangements were made to "commence operations," the railroad was completed. On March 15, 1860 about eight hundred citizens of Jacksonville traveled over the road from Jacksonville to Alligator to participate in festivities held to celebrate the long awaited completion of the project. A free barbecue, felicitous speeches, and promises of future prosperity for the road and the area it served were parts of this celebration.²⁴ Even in Tallahassee the final completion of the road was greeted with enthusiasm. The Tallahassee *Floridian* commented:

. . . the Central Railroad is now completed. The energy which has directed the work has met with merited success; its engagements have been met, and its credit maintained throughout. . . . The business prospects of the road, together with its valuable lands and able management, would seem to indicate a realization of the results hithertofore claimed for it.²⁵

In such fashion came the first railroad to connect Jacksonville with the interior of Florida.

(The foregoing account of the establishment of railroad transportation between Jacksonville and Lake City is part of the background for the author's doctoral dissertation on the role of Captain E. M. L'Engle in the operation of the Florida Central Railroad, successor to the Florida, Atlantic and Gulf Central. As additional background, he is currently engaged in the preparation of an article for this *Quarterly* on the Swepson-Littlefield fraud, one of the most flagrant examples of dishonest financing in the history of the State.

He and the *Quarterly* would be grateful for any word of company records or correspondence pertaining to Captain L'Engle and the Florida Central Railroad. (Ed.)

22. *Floridian and Journal* Dec. 3, 1859. Governor M. S. Perry is quoted as saying, "Four years ago, the St. Marks road, twenty miles in length and worked by horsepower, was the only road in the State. We now have about 350 miles of road graded and about 250 miles of iron rail laid, upon which the cars are running daily, and the iron purchased to complete the balance of the roads graded. . . . The iron rails have been laid on about . . . 50 miles of the Florida Atlantic and Gulf Central.

23. Fernandina, *East Floridian*, Jan. 26, 1860.

24. *Ibid.* March 18, 1860.

25. *Floridian and Journal* March 17, 1860.