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Unfulfilled Promise: The Blue Ridge Railroad

The ill-fated Blue Ridge Railroad (BRRR), while never completed, left behind a legacy of artifacts and unanswered questions that are of interest to both historians and the general public.

The history of the BRRR can be traced back to nineteenth century America's obsession with rail lines, the latest mode of transportation which drove westward expansion and linked disparate regional commercial centers. Especially for farmers and manufactures in the Midwest, railroads meant they no longer needed to depend upon the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to move their goods to New Orleans for shipment elsewhere. Instead, commerce could be routed by rail directly to eastern seaports as a faster and more cost-effective way to reach markets up and down the Atlantic coast.

South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun was one of the first men to recognize the economic importance of linking South Atlantic and Midwest centers of commerce, when in 1836 he re-

portedly circled Rabun Gap, Georgia on a map and exclaimed: "There is your gap, there is the great pass; there the mountains recede ... as though they invited the States of this great confederacy to pass and repair them." As envisioned by Senator Calhoun, a rail line through Rabun Gap would ultimately connect Charleston, South Carolina with Cincinnati, Ohio. For Charleston's business leaders, this meant they could position their city as the "commercial emporium of the

beginning work on its own rail line, the Western and Atlantic, to connect Atlanta with Chattanooga. Once completed, the Western and Atlantic would be part of a larger network of lines linking the port of Savannah with the Midwest. This threatened Calhoun's plans for Charleston and most likely explains why he reportedly contemplated making an offer to purchase Rabun County from Georgia. Such a purchase would have safeguarded his interests in the vital Rabun Gap pass.



A 2016 photo shows remains still visible after more than 150 years.

Obviously, Senator Calhoun's offer never materialized and in 1852, sixteen years after the senator's original proposal and about two years after the Western and Atlantic was completed, the BRRR was chartered as an approximate 195-mile stretch of line to run between Anderson, South Carolina and Knoxville, Tennessee. From these two towns, the Blue Ridge would connect with other lines to complete the entire Charleston-Cincinnati link.

South."

Unfortunately for Senator Calhoun, by 1837 Georgia was

The new railroad's general route was to begin in Anderson, travel west, and enter Rabun County after crossing over a bridge at the Chattooga River. The line would then

The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

travel through Clayton and Mountain City before reaching Rabun Gap and “the Locust Stake” at the Georgia / North Carolina line. Travelling through the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee by way of the Little Tennessee River Valley, the line would finally turn north to reach Knoxville.

Within Rabun County, after crossing the Chattooga in the vicinity of Sandy Ford, the Blue Ridge line was to pass through Dick’s Creek Tunnel at Wall Mountain and move into the Warwoman watershed. There railroad workers would build two bridges over Warwoman Creek as well as Saddle Gap Tunnel just west of current-day Warwoman Dell. After exiting the Saddle Gap Tunnel, the train would reach Clayton at the future site of the Bleckley Memorial Institute just east of town. Continuing on, the train would cross present-day Prime Hill Drive on a fill, pass through a cut at the top of the hill, and gently curve north to Mountain City and on to Rabun Gap.

Significantly, engineering plans called for a “first-class road” based on a belief that upfront investments in a quality infrastructure would be offset by lower track maintenance and operating costs. This meant that sharp curves and steep grades would be avoided by tunneling through rather than going around mountains. It was this plan that gave rise to the Dick’s Creek and Saddle Gap Tunnels. Of these two, only the partially completed Dick’s Creek Tunnel still stands, and portions of it are

flooded.

The engineering plan also meant that cheaper construction alternatives like wooden trestles would be avoided. Instead, the two bridges that crossed Warwoman Creek would be supported by masonry work and constructed with a combination of timber and iron

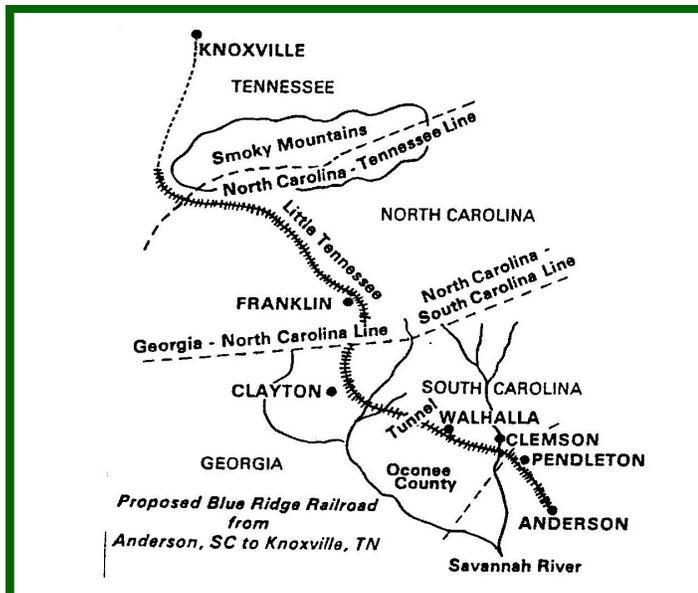


The entrance to the Dick’s Creek tunnel is now on private property and filled with feet of water and a bat colony.

for greater strength and durability. In fact, the granite bridge abutments still stand.

Regrettably, all the planning that preceded the BRRR was not enough to bring it to completion. Originally designed as a four-year project (roughly, 1854 to 1858), the railroad experienced financial, political, administrative, legal, and labor challenges before largely coming to a halt in 1859. By this point only one-sixth of the total distance to Knoxville had been completed, that being the approximate 33-mile section between Anderson and Walhalla. As for Rabun, an 1859 report from the chief engineer noted that about forty percent of the grading, fourteen percent of tunnel excavation, and sixty-six percent of drain masonry and bridge masonry had been completed (Note: Other completion reports vary across sources). Meanwhile, in North Carolina work had yet to begin.

Despite ongoing attempts to push forward, or at least complete the rail line to Clayton, by 1860 and the election of Abraham Lincoln as President, it was clear that Senator Calhoun’s dream had come to an end. Now, the attention of legislators, business leaders and the public at large would be consumed by discussions of southern secession. And while later attempts were made to resur-



Map of Blue Ridge Railroad route. Courtesy of Oconee County Public Library, Walhalla, SC

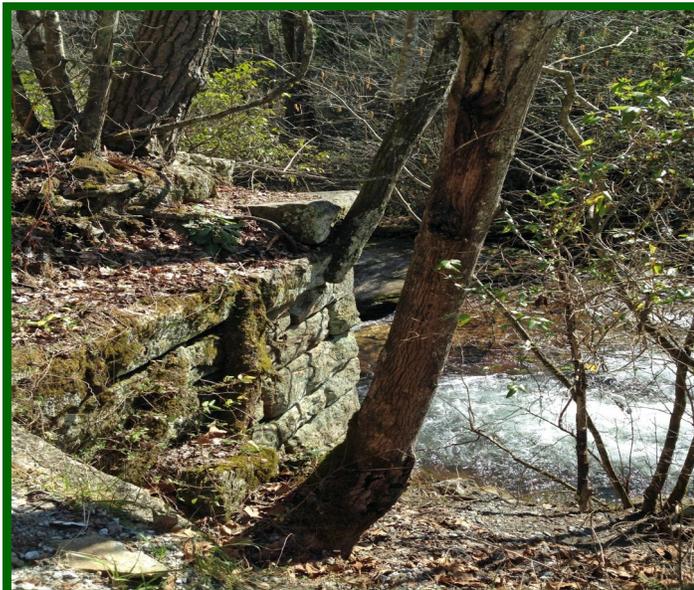
rect some version of the Blue Ridge line, most notably by the Black Diamond Railroad Company in the 1890s, none proved successful.

What did prove successful were the remnants of the BRRR which still stand as reminders of what might have been. Some remnants are nuanced, like the leftover granite stone which was reportedly used in building the Clayton Methodist Church and paving Rabun's early roads. Other remnants are more visible, like the tunnels and stone abutments mentioned above, as well as portions of the railway bed. All of these are of keen interest to hikers, photographers and railroad history buffs.

Still other remnants live on as legends. Might immigrant workers really have been buried inside Saddle Gap Tunnel when it collapsed? Did moonshiners really hide



The photo of this abutment taken in the 1890s shows the scale of the construction with *Clayton Tribune* publisher John Reynolds standing in front.



A current photo near Warwoman Creek shows how well the construction has stood the test of time.

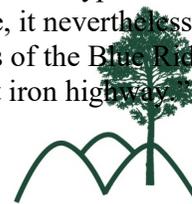
their stills inside Dick's Creek Tunnel? We do know that Disney Studios used the entrance to Dick's Creek Tunnel in the 1970's movie, "The Million Dollar Dixie Deliverance."

There were also suggestions as to how remnants of the Blue Ridge line might be repurposed. These included turning the Dick's Creek Tunnel into a historic state park and incorporating the Blue Ridge route into a national auto highway. In reality, there is only one example where the work done on the BRRR was repur-

posed, and that is when its graded roadbed north of Clayton was used as the foundation for the Tallulah Falls Railroad (TFRR). It is of note, however, that the TFRR engineers chose not to incorporate the Blue Ridge line's stone culverts into their new railroad, opting instead for wooden trestles. Today, the forty-two wooden trestles are gone while many of the much older culverts remain in place.

Finally, there is the question of how a successful BRRR might have altered history. Some, for example, have suggested that its completion would have made modern-day Clayton a "railroad center" with a population to rival that of Asheville or Knoxville. Others have warned that such success could just as well have transformed Rabun into an urban "industrial slum."

Even more enticing is the question of whether completion of the BRRR could have played a role in the Civil War, perhaps making Rabun County the real rather than imagined location of the "Great Locomotive Chase." On the other hand, there is also the possibility that completion of the Blue Ridge line might have helped to prevent the Civil War by providing greater economic and social links between north and south. While this more upbeat hypothesis is best left to historians to debate, it nevertheless is one of the more poignant reminders of the Blue Ridge line's unfulfilled promise as a "great iron highway."

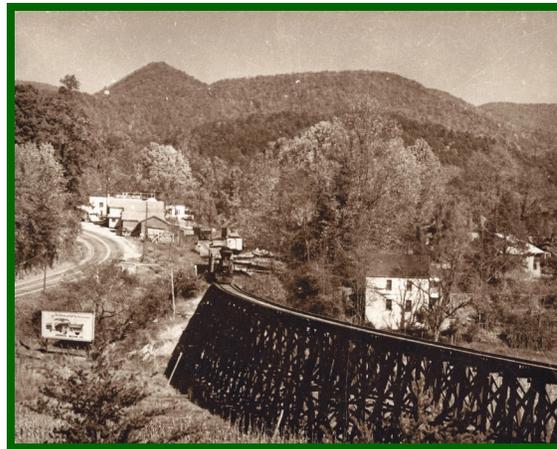


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- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment



The Scott's Creek trestle of the Tallulah Falls Railroad in 1955 shows a locomotive from the movie "The Great Locomotive Chase" entering southbound. The main north-south highway, also Clayton's Main Street, features a billboard from the Derrick Motor Company, a Ford dealer.

"There is nothing permanent except change."

—Heraclitus

Please visit our new exhibit at the Rabun County Library beginning June 1 through June 30. It will feature photos from 1900 to 1970 and the historical changes they depict.

