

RAILROADING

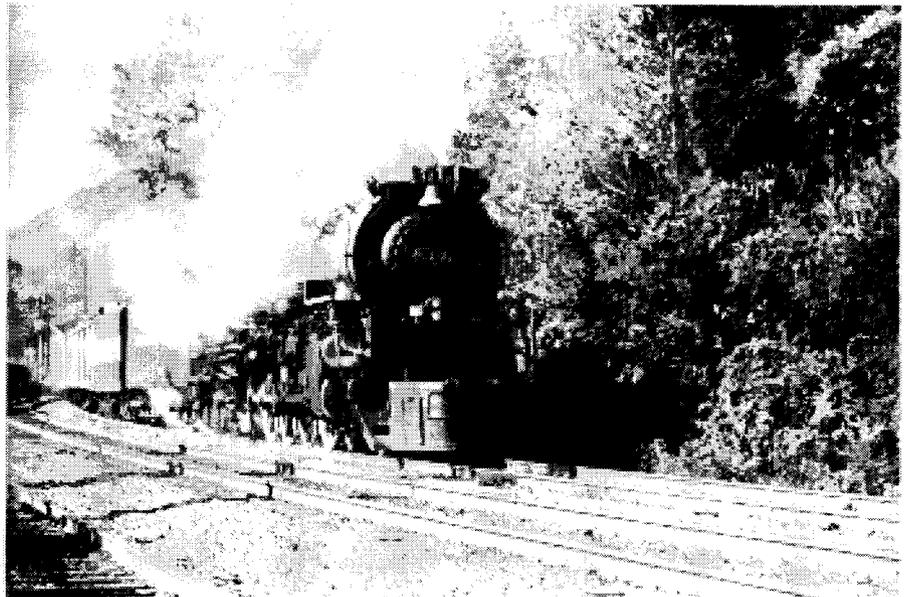
Railroading within New River Gorge

Overview

As the nation started to grow, so did the need to find a quick means of transporting supplies, bulk raw materials, finished products, and people. Traveling by wagon took too long. Because of the great amount of supplies required for the journey, little or no room was left for extra materials. Improved river navigation and construction of canals provided a temporary solution. Canals, which were a means of tapping the vast resources of the nation's interior, shortened the time of trips and made shipping freight cheaper. In turn, prices of goods in canal towns were less expensive than goods in other places. For years explorers, surveyors, politicians, and merchants dreamed of building a canal system from Richmond, Virginia, to the Ohio River. In fact, every coastal port between Boston and Norfolk wanted to establish a transportation system to the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. A number of canal systems, such as the Erie Canal across New York and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal along the Maryland and Virginia border, were constructed. There was even a canal built along the James River in Virginia from Richmond through the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Great Valley of Shenandoah, but it never reached the Ohio River.

Besides the Erie Canal, at least 19 canals were in use or being dug by 1925, but faster, more efficient transportation was needed. The railroad answered the call. Early railroads consisted of little more than a basic steam engine pulling wagons. In the 1820s–1830s, railroads were small lines that connected nearby towns and cities. Later these lines combined to form larger systems. By the time the American Civil War erupted in the 1860s, railroads had become the dominant means of long-distance transportation. People, raw materials, and finished goods could travel by rail over long distances at unimaginable speeds to the rapidly growing nation.

Because of the cheap, fast, and efficient transportation made available by railways, the Industrial Revolution, which had started in England years before, began in America. Manufacturing and railroad transportation became linked. After the Civil War, the American railroad system developed at an amazing rate. Competition among rail companies in some areas became so intense that duplicate



A steam engine pulls a train along the tracks near Thurmond.

National Park Service Photo



lines were constructed. Due to the ever expanding system of railroads, America became an industrial giant, manufacturing one-half of all products in the world during the last century and a half.

In 1828 construction began on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad by a group of Baltimore merchants seeking a direct link to the Ohio River. The undertaking established the B&O as the pioneer railroad system in the United States. The B&O reached the Ohio River at Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia) in December 1852. At the same time, Virginia was still struggling to find a link from Richmond to the Ohio. Until a rail transportation system could be built, the rich natural resources of coal and timber in the New River Gorge remained untapped.

In 1850 the Virginia Central Railway was incorporated and charged with the construction of a railway from Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio River. By 1867, the railway had been completed to Covington, Virginia, near the West Virginia border. Construction of the line westward from Covington

was being undertaken by the Covington and Ohio; Virginia and West Virginia appointed a commission in 1868 to secure financial backing and oversee the completion of the railroad to the Ohio River. The Virginia Central Railway Company was contracted to complete the work. Under this arrangement, the name of the railway was changed to the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad (later Railway). In November 1869, Collis P. Huntington committed financial resources to the railway to ensure the successful completion of the project across West Virginia to the Ohio River. 1869 and 1873 were busy years for engineers, contractors, and



The Thurmond Depot as it stills stands today.

laborers.

In his book *Riding That New River Train*, Eugene Huddleston writes: “On January 29, 1873, the last spike was driven on the New River bridge at Hawk’s Nest, and C&O Vice President General William C. Wickham’s special Richmond train proceeded westward to Charleston and Huntington. At Charleston, the event was celebrated by appropriate display of speeches, terminating in a great display of fireworks. At Huntington, the union of opposing waters by bands of steel was celebrated by pouring into the Ohio a barrel of James River water brought from Richmond. The president, in his speech, emphasized four great advantages of the road: (1) shortness of route between the Ohio and Norfolk harbor; (2) its easy grade and reduced number of curves; (3) the mild climate along the route; (4) the short distance of its Huntington terminus from Cincinnati.”

The railroad brought many opportunities to the New River Gorge. It brought people, jobs, communities, and the ability to open mines and lumber camps. Communities such as Hinton and Thurmond sprung up as support towns for the railroad. Practically everyone who lived in these communities were affiliated with the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. The railroad also provided an avenue to transport the coal, timber, and other goods out of the gorge to a national market.

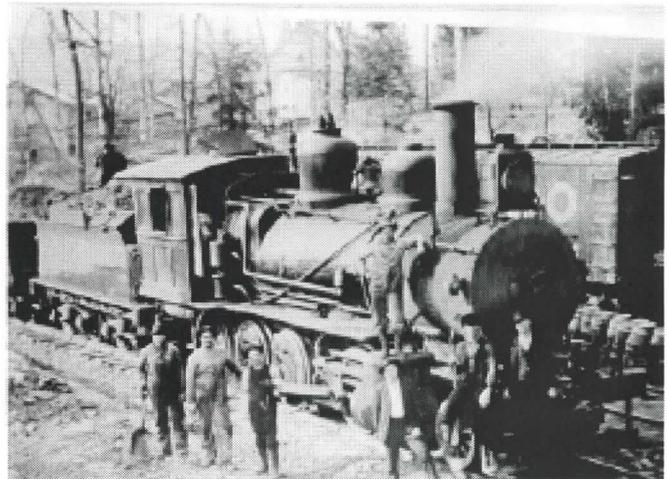
Everyone in the New River Gorge depended on the railroad because no roads ran the entire length of the gorge. Rail travel was the only mode of transportation through the gorge. To travel between coal camps and beyond either meant walking or riding the train. Students often rode the train to school; people traveled to the doctor, hospital, and store by train; even mail service was provided by train. Rail travel was a way of life.



Charles Smith, a former resident of Fire Creek, recalls this way of life vividly:

Each Monday the Fayetteville Taxi Company's trip left Fayetteville at about 10 a.m. and followed the tortuous twist and hairpin turns of the Fayette Mountain Road to the C&O Railway station at South Fayette. The first leg of the trip is a memorable one in itself. The twelve-foot wide pavement carved into the mountainside immediately initiates (travelers) to the rugged nature of the New River Gorge. Arriving at the station, we enter the depot and purchase tickets to Fire Creek, and we don't have long to wait as these local trains are most always on time.

No. 14 pulls into the station, its bell clanging, with two or three coaches and a combination mail and express car. It is pulled by a 2-4-2 steam locomotive, with four, six-foot, silver-trimmed drive wheels, and spewing steam from the pop-off valves of each cylinder. The brakeman opens the metal safety gate, depresses the latch that holds the cover over the steps with his foot, and it folds back against the stairwell, latching into place. Picking up the steel step stool, he descends the three steps holding to the support bar, swings down and places it on the landing platform. The locomotive chugs to a screeching halt as brake pads press against the steel wheels.



Railroad workers stand in front of a G-4 engine.

At the same time, the station master pulls his baggage wagon parallel to the door of the mail and express car to exchange mail bags and express shipments. These wagons are about four feet high and have a flat bed about three feet wide by six feet long. The wheels are wooden-spoked, with a steel rim and about three feet in diameter. The two front wheels are mounted to the flat bed to allow them to be turned sharply to the right or left by a wooden tongue. This arrangement makes it easy for him to maneuver the wagon on the narrow platform between the tracks and the depot.

After leaving South Fayette, the first stop of the east-bound locals is called out by the brakeman as he goes from one coach to the other, 'Next station stop ... Kaymoor.' The engineers warn those waiting, by one long and two short blasts of his steam whistle: Whe OO-Whoo oo-Whoo ooo. The train begins to slow and in a few minutes, we pass the gray, black bordered, sign inscribed 'Kaymoor.' We screech to a halt in front of the store and are inspected by lots of upturned faces checking each window for familiar ones.

Such scenes occurred daily along the rails that snaked around the mountains and along the river in the New River Gorge. Now, diesel and electric engines pull the freight trains carrying coal, chemicals, and other items. Amtrak passenger trains still pass by what is left of once bustling coal towns, but long gone are the days when fourteen passenger trains passed through the New River Gorge and smoke puffed out of the smokestacks of steam engines.

