

The Railway
Historical
Southeast



& Locomotive
Society, Inc.
Chapter

Newsletter No. 63, February, 2001



Jacksonville Terminal History

from Jacksonville Convention Complex press release

Once abandoned and nearly in ruin, the Jacksonville Terminal is a source of wonderment to new generations since it reopened on October 17, 1986, fully restored to its original beauty and grandeur as the architectural centerpiece of the new Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center.

The terminal was built with a massive kind of magnificence not merely as a train station, but to symbolize and demonstrate the power and glory of Florida railroading in the days when steam engines and passenger

trains were in their heyday. Built on reclaimed marshland, from an award-winning Greek revival design by New York Architect, Kenneth M. Murchison, the terminal and yards required extensive preparations, including the driving of more than 2,000 pine pilings, some to the depth of 70 feet. The site work was begun in January of 1917, and on April 1, 1918, construction was launched on the terminal itself.

As the enormous building began to take shape, it dwarfed the old 1895 Flagler depot, and its facade of 14 stately Doric columns, each standing 42 feet high and weighing 45 tons, set the tone for a lofty elegance inside that had no counterpart in anything ever built in Jacksonville before. A cathedral-like ceiling vaulted gracefully some 75 feet over the main waiting room's marbled floor, conveying an impression of enormous spaces soaring and arching overhead with a massive magnificence that somehow conveyed an astonishing delicacy, evoking signs of wonder and awe when the station opened its doors to the public.

The opening took place one minute after midnight, November 17, 1919, a time when the fewest trains were running. As the hour struck, Supt. J. C. Blanton issued a curt command to his crew: "Open the doors, boys, let's go," he said, and the men walked quietly into the new terminal, leaving the old Flagler depot behind to be converted into offices for the Jacksonville Terminal Company and for larger baggage and mail-handling facilities.

Supt. Blanton admitted he would have loved a celebration, "to be able to have a band on hand, serve punch, and stage a great dance in the aisles of the new waiting room and the great concourse." But it wasn't to be. The trains were rolling and they would continue to roll for 55 years.

The trains had names as romantic and appealing as a locomotive whistle blowing what tunesmith Johnny Mercer called "those blues in the night." Names like the *Royal Palm* and the *Ponce de Leon*, the *Silver Meteor*, the *Flamingo*, the *Orange Blossom Special* and the *Dixie Flagler*.

During its heyday as many as 142 trains and 30,000 people passed through the Jacksonville Union Terminal each day. In 1944, when World War II rail travel peaked, nearly 40,000 trains passed through the terminal, carrying 10 million passengers!

Those were the years when everybody who was anybody passed through Jacksonville by train at one time or another. Old timers who worked at the terminal recall that every president since Harding, and most of the celebrities of stage and screen passed through on their way south to Palm Beach, Miami, Key West and other Florida resorts when they were at the height of their popularity.

The last train out of the old terminal was Amtrak 93, formerly the Seaboard's *Floridian*, on a trip which had originated in Chicago. It passed through Jacksonville bound for St. Petersburg at 2 a. m. on January 3, 1974. Later that same day the first Amtrak train pulled into the city's brand new Amtrak station on Edgewood Avenue.

One year after closing, a local architect and developer unveiled plans for converting the terminal into a complex of restaurants and shops to be called Gaslight Station Square, but nothing came of the project. A similar proposal to convert the terminal and the old Flagler depot into a downtown entertainment complex also failed to materialize. Soon afterward, in February of 1979, an arsonist set fire to the old Flagler depot, destroying it. Not long afterward, the untouched main terminal was used briefly to house a flea market and bazaar.

Meanwhile, on November 12, 1977, Riverside Avondale Preservation staged a party in the terminal to focus attention on its plight. After volunteers cleaned the place from one end to another and removed a false ceiling in the main waiting room, the doors were thrown open and so many attended (some estimates ran as high as 10,000 people), it became clearly evident how deeply entrenched in public sentiment the old terminal had become.

Finally, in the opening months of 1982 a group of investors and developers approached the Mayor of

SOUTHEAST CHAPTER OFFICERS:

James A. Smith	Chairman
William F. Howes, Jr.	Vice-Chairman
Mark S. Bennett	Secretary
James H. Wilk	Treasurer
Clifford J. Vander Yacht	Editor

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Jacksonville with a plan for restoring the terminal as part of a much-needed downtown Convention Center. A Union Terminal Negotiating Committee was created and headed by retired Seaboard and CSX chairman and chief executive officer Prime F. Osborn and the committee were charged with developing the formal financing plan necessary for “a public-private partnership” needed to make the Convention Center possible.

On November 22, 1983, City Council approved a \$37.2 million bond issue to finance a Convention Center at the old terminal site, as well as various public improvements elsewhere in the city. Costing \$24.5 million, the Convention Center construction contract, including restoration of the old Jacksonville Terminal, was awarded to the Jacksonville Convention Center Joint Venture, the group of investors and developers who had originated the project.

The Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center is expected to have a total annual economic impact on Jacksonville of about \$50 million when it operates at full capacity, according to Thomas M. Mobley, executive director.

In 1978, four years after the terminal closed, David P. Morgan, editor of *Trains* magazine, published a story about the old railroad station which concluded: “Today, Jacksonville Terminal, like Morley, is dead.” As Dickens put it. “There is no doubt whatsoever about that ... dead as a doornail.”

And so it might have been, but for the interest and efforts of government, civic and business leaders like Prime F. Osborn III; of city preservationists, who kept the dream alive; and of so many imaginative developers and investors, who fought to make the dream come true.



COVER: The impressive Jacksonville Terminal building looked like this in the 1940s. **ABOVE:** #1723 and 1724 are not on track nine. **BACK COVER:** Seaboard's Silver Meteor waits during this World War II shot. All photos by Carl E. Gerber, collection of William F. Howes, Jr.

Minutes of the Southeast Chapter, Railway & Locomotive Historical Society

The December 14th meeting began at 6:00 PM in the CSXT general Office Building in Jacksonville, FL with an informal presentation by the mother of chapter member Paul Barnes of her experiences while accompanying the Apollo II Astronauts on a world-wide good will mission. Mrs. Barnes provided a very interesting inside look at the logistics and effects of such an undertaking. Our thanks to her for taking time to visit with us.

The Treasurer reported a current balance of \$500.77

Old Business

2001 R&LHS Annual Convention - Jim Smith reported that:

- The NRHS chapters in Florida would be invited to attend
- Hotel food arrangements had been finalized
- Possible speakers include Don Phillips and Seth Bramson

Scranton Rail Camp - no developments

Publications - Ed Mueller provided a possible publication outline and a detailed inventory of rail photos available through the Florida Photographic Archives which could be used in any new publication

Ballots for the election of officers for 2001 have been mailed.

Committee Reports

R&LHS National Items - Bill Howes is seeking feedback from the membership on the photo printing process used in Railroad History # 183 .

Annual Chapter Banquet - Jim Smith reminded everyone present about the January 11th banquet. Bill Howes will contact Jack Herd for a possible presentation at the banquet on Jack's private cars.

Announcements

The Jacksonville Train Show will be held on 2/17/01.

Respectfully submitted

Mark Bennett
Acting Secretary

Minutes of the Southeast Chapter, Railway & Locomotive Historical Society

The January meeting of the Southeast Chapter of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society was held on January 11, 2001 aboard private rail cars *Georgia 300* and *Jacksonville* in Orange Park, Florida, as part of the chapter's annual banquet. Members and their guests were in attendance.

Secretary's Report: The December meeting minutes were approved as reported.

2001 Election Results: Fifty-three (53) ballots were sent out and 29 were returned, all voting for the proposed slate of officers:

Jim Smith - President
Bill Howes - Vice-President
Mark Bennett - Secretary
Jim Wilk - Treasurer

Appointment of Directors: The slate of directors will remain the same as last year: Mark Bennett, Paul Newtonson, and Cliff Vander Yacht.

R&LHS Convention: Jim Smith advised that there will be a meeting of the convention committee at his home on Monday, January 15, at 7:30 PM.

The meeting program featured Jack Heard speaking about his private car, the *Georgia 300*, and a tour by Roxanne Marshall of her private car, the *Katy 430*.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul Newtonson
Acting Secretary, R&LHS

Minutes of the Southeast Chapter, Railway & Locomotive Historical Society

The February meeting of the Southeast Chapter was held at the CSXT General Office Building. The Chairman reported that the annual Florida Corporation Report had been completed and filed on schedule. The Secretary's report was approved as submitted. The Treasurer reported a current balance of \$867.44.

Old Business:

1. Convention -
 - (a) an acceptable insurance quotation has been received from the Perry Agency.
 - (b) Feb. 15th has been set as the mailing date for the convention registration mailer.
2. Rail Camp - no development
3. Book Committee - Committee Chair Ed Mueller reported progress on the possible publication of a book of historical Florida railroad photos; a search of various photo archives indicated that 200 to 300 photos were available for consideration. Jim Wilk indicated that the Chapter had now recovered the cost of publication for its first publication.

New Business:

None to report

Other Items

The next issue of the Newsletter will have a Jacksonville focus. Consideration should be given to reducing reproduction costs.

Bill Howes noted the passing of Arnold Joseph and O. Winston Link.

Jim Smith will send a thank you note to Jack Heard for the use of his cars for the Annual Banquet. Jim also asked that the members consider volunteering to serve on the Program Committee.

The March meeting program will be presented by Bill Howes on the ACL/SAL.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark S. Bennett,
Secretary



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