



# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## The Importance of Georgia's Western & Atlantic Railroad

By Robert Jenkins, July 28, 2020

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Col. Stephen H. Long drives a stake into the ground at the southern terminus of the Western & Atlantic Railroad, September 1837; sketch by Wilbur G. Kurtz | Courtesy the Atlanta History Center

The Georgia General Assembly in 1836 voted to create a state railroad from the Tennessee River near Chattanooga south “to a point on the southeastern bank of the Chattahoochee River,” according to Gov. Wilson Lumpkin. He and the Georgia legislature hoped to link Georgia and her coastal and river cities and farms with the Midwest region of the sprawling country. With the removal from middle Georgia of the Creek Indians in the 1820s and the Cherokee Indians in the 1830s from north Georgia, and after the discovery of gold near Dahlonega around 1828, the fledgling state began carving up and giving out the newly acquired lands of northwest Georgia to white settlers in a series of land lotteries.

Further, as the state's population rapidly grew, westward expansion and the need for new roads, particularly the new railroad for train travel, was inevitable. The new railroad was to be called the Western & Atlantic Railroad of the State of Georgia, an appropriate name describing the legislators' goal of joining the two regions across the state. Col. Stephen Harriman Long, an experienced Army engineer, was commissioned to choose the best and most practical route for the new rail line. Beginning on the Tennessee River at Rossville, Long mapped out several routes through the Southern Appalachians toward the center of Georgia and the Chattahoochee River and carefully surveyed each one. In 1837, after considering a half-dozen routes, he finally settled on an ending point about 8 miles south of the Chattahoochee River where connecting ridges and Indian trails converged. He drove a stake into the red clay near what is now Five Points in downtown Atlanta. This location would mark the ending place for the new rail line through northwest Georgia.



Map of the country embracing the various routes surveyed for the Western & Atlantic Railroad of Georgia | U.S. Topographical Bureau M.H. Stansbury, Delaware

As construction of the Western & Atlantic Railroad from this southernmost point, or “Terminus,” progressed to the northwest toward Chattanooga, other railroad construction began, linking the Terminus of the Western & Atlantic Railroad to the rest of Georgia so that by the time of the outbreak of the Civil War there were four rail lines with five railroad companies sending trains regularly to the Gate City, as Atlanta became to be called.

“By 1861 Georgia had an extensive railroad system, the best in the Deep South and second only to Virginia in the whole South. Over fourteen hundred miles of tracks, mostly 5-foot gauge, crisscrossed central Georgia, spilled over into the northern and southern sections of the state, and linked up with other lines snaking out into the rest of the nation,” according to historian Kenneth Coleman.

While each state developed their own rail lines as the industrial revolution spread across the nation, Georgia outspent her sister states by pumping some \$26 million into her rail lines, including over \$6 million in the Western & Atlantic Railroad during this time. The ratio of railroad miles to inhabitants in Georgia was 1 to 744 in an 1860 study, as compared to 1 to 1,083 miles for the rest of the country.

In contrast, older and wealthier states such as New York and Pennsylvania failed to match railroad expansion in the southern state that her citizens proudly called the “Empire State of the South.”



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