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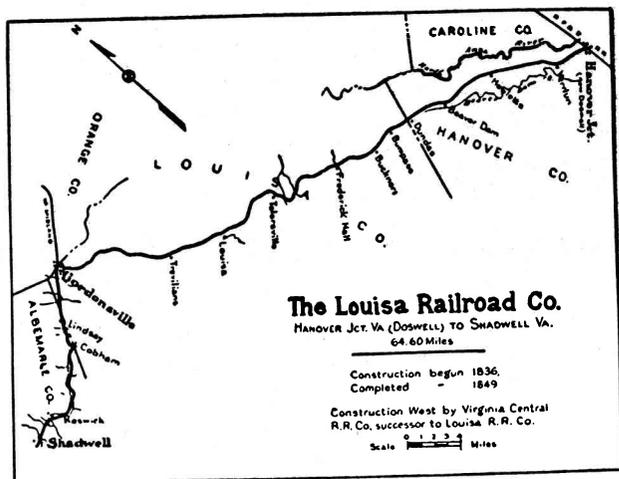
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Cover: Louisa County Courthouse, 1818-1905



*Frederick Harris*  
*The First President*  
*1836-1840*



## THE LOUISA RAILROAD 1836-1850

by Dr. Charles W. Turner  
Lexington, Virginia

The Louisa Railroad was among the first in the nation to head west. Other lines had connected one eastern city to another in a North-South direction. The people of Louisa were landlocked and had an increasing need for a facility that would open the Richmond market to them. They did not have ready access to the James River and the private road companies were slow to afford adequate access eastward. Although, the Board of Public Works had been established in 1816 and the state had shown an interest in transportation it was local initiative which led to construction of the railroad. The Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad Company had been chartered in 1827 but did not enter Louisa county. However, it would later provide a system through which transportation could be provided from Louisa County to Richmond. In fact, some interested people of Louisa first urged a branch line beginning at Taylorsville on the RF&P and extending through the county.<sup>1</sup>

At Louisa Court House on September 14, 1835, a meeting of interested citizens was called to consider the possible construction of a Louisa Railroad. Thomas Johnson was chairman and B. M. Francisco acted as secretary. Edmund Fontaine of Beaverdam, later third president of the line, spoke in favor of the line and said approximately \$600 had been raised to defray the expense of surveys for possible routes. He stated further that Moncure Robinson, C.E., of Ashland had agreed to make the original surveys to see which of two routes from Doswell west was feasible. They agreed to petition the General Assembly for a charter of incorporation.<sup>2</sup> They adjourned after further discussion to await the Robinson report. Frederick Harris presented Robinson's report to a second gathering of citizens early in 1836. The report declared the route between the Little and North Anna Rivers to be the better of the two alternatives. The original line would run from Taylorsville through Garrett's, Terrell's, Bumpass', Spicer's, etc., and would cost over \$300,000.<sup>3</sup> The report was accepted at the meeting and Robinson was voted a sum for his services.

On February 18, 1836 the General Assembly passed a bill that was to be the charter of the Louisa Railroad Company. This act allowed the company to build a railroad from Doswell to Gordonsville, thus cutting through the entire county, and the state promised to subscribe to the company's stock. The original stock outlay would be \$300,000

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1. Charles W. Turner. *Chessie's Road*. (Richmond: Garrett and Massie. 1956), possim, chap. ii.

2. *Richmond Enquirer*, September 20, October 6, 1835.

3. Ibid: Moncure Robinson, *Report on Louisa Surveys*, Virginia State Library Archives.

### *The Louisa Railroad, 1836-1850*

which could be increased to \$500,000 to complete the line. The charter allowed the company to enter private land holdings in order to claim acreage for the right-of-way and to purchase materials along these said right-of-ways. These transactions could occur only after an impartial board had set the value to be paid the owner of land and materials. The R. F. and P. could be contracted with for transportation by paying it a portion of the passenger and freight returns. Dividends might be paid after the miles of line had been put into service.<sup>4</sup>

On May 9, 1836 the stock books were opened and the stock was quickly subscribed. Three-fifths of the stock was taken privately while the state bought the remainder.

In 1836, the company formally organized at the Court House with a president, secretary, treasurer and a Board of Directors. Frederick Harris, Jr. of Frederick's Hall plantation<sup>5</sup> was elected president. He served as Captain Harris in the War of 1812 and was a tobacco planter when he became president of the railroad. He also had a tobacco factory at Frederick Hall where he manufactured "Louisa Pride" and "Soldiers' Comfort" smoking tobacco. These products would certainly have a broader market with the coming of the railroad. Harris served as president of the railroad until his death in 1840.<sup>6</sup>

Frederick Harris's handsome brick house with large brick pillars and fine English glass windows remains a show place. Here, Stonewall Jackson spent a night in 1863. Today, Dr. and Mrs. L. A. Mounter are restoring and preserving much of the original beauty of Frederick's Hall. The cemetery, which is located a short distance from the main house, is enclosed with a half brick-half stone fence. Here Frederick Harris and his wife, Catherine Snelson Harris and a number of other people are buried.

The promises to be fulfilled by the new railroad were expressed by B. M. Francisco in the *Richmond Whig* of April 1, 1836: "The contemplated railroad, from the City of Richmond to Louisa Court House, will be a great inducement to one who wishes to make an investment in real estate...it will be inviting to the capitalist, and add to the present flattering prices of produce and lead to the company's success itself."<sup>7</sup>

Most people appeared eager to help all along the path of the steamhorse. Local householders prepared food for the railroad builders. Most of the building was done by Hopkins, the chief engineer, with the help of C. R. Mason. More than 400 slaves, some purchased by the company, and others hired from their masters

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4. *Charter of the Louisa Railroad*, Virginia State Library Archives.

5. Malcolm Harris. *History of Louisa County Virginia*, (Richmond, The Deitz Press, pp 146,147.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Richmond Whig*, April 1, 1836.

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worked on the first stretch.<sup>8</sup> On December 20, 1837 the first engine and three cars left Richmond on the R.F. and P. rails at nine o'clock in the morning, and arrived at Frederick Hall at one o'clock in the afternoon. Upon the arrival of the steamhorse, the scene was one of festivity with many notables present.<sup>9</sup>

The line was profitable and an extension to Louisa Court House was completed by December 1838. At the opening party given at the Louisa hotel the following toasts were proposed: "The Eighth of January: The day on which internal strength so far overcame external forces, as to protect the fair and the wealthy from the hands of ruffins, and left the free to the enjoyment thereof;" and "Railroads and canals: The arteries which convey the life blood of the body politic."<sup>10</sup>

After the completion of the first extension, Louisa Court House became the eastern terminus of the railroad. Twice daily passengers and freight were picked up by stage and wagon for points westward.

The Court House had hardly been reached before agitation started for a Gordonsville extension. Interested citizens called a meeting at Louisa to discuss the matter. Some of those attending included J. W. Saunders, W. H. Meriweather, Mann Page, James H. Terrill and John R. Jones. The first surveys spoke of a cost of \$8,000 instead of \$6,000 per mile heretofore needed. This increase did not deter the effort. The stock was raised, and Hunter and Milton contracted to build the Louisa-Gordonsville line. This line was completed January 1, 1840. The state continued to contribute to the railroad even though it was still spending far more for the famous James River and Kanawha Canal project.

From Gordonsville how would the line run? There were supporters for two routes: one through Barboursville and the other, a "straight shoot" to Charlottesville. The company decided in favor of the second route. Business conditions were poor in the early forties and stock sold very slowly for the Charlottesville project. T. J. Randolph finally completed the construction in 1850. This extension was opened in stages: first to Cobham, to Roger's Mill, to Shadwell, and finally to Charlottesville.<sup>11</sup>

In the forties, the stockholders urged the Louisa line to become independent of the R.F. and P. and to build a separate line into the capital city. The R.F. and P. was receiving \$17,500 for transportation and desired to continue providing the Doswell to Richmond transportation for the younger line. When the Louisa company tried to be independent, the R.F. and P. tried through court action to stop the Louisa company from entering Richmond. The R.F. and P. declared

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8. *Railway Age*, December 2, 1922, July 5, 1924.

9. *Annual Report of Chesapeake and Ohio Railway 1923*.

10. *Richmond Enquirer*, January 15, 1839

11. Charles Turner, "Louisa Railroad" (unpublished, "thesis", University of Richmond, 1937).

### *The Louisa Railroad, 1836-1850*

that it had the sole right to provide transportation from Frederickburg to Richmond. The Louisa Railroad won its case over the R.F. and P. and the General Assembly by an act of March 27, 1848 authorized a \$200,000 stock increase for the Richmond extension. The company of Elisha Melton was contracted for the building. The extension opened in 1850 to give Louisa Railroad Company a mileage of 64.6 miles.<sup>12</sup> Also in 1850, after the completion of the extension to Richmond and the one to Gordonsville, the General Assembly changed the name of the railroad to the Virginia Central since the tracts extended into a number of counties.

In June of 1840, Charles Y. Kimbrough of Louisa Court House was elected president of the Louisa line. He had been a state legislator for a long time and was a stockholder and director of the railroad company. He died in 1843 and was succeeded as president of the company by Edmund Fontaine of Beaverdam who served the railroad until 1865. The presidents were well thought of and worked for the best interest of the company. Many prominent Louisians served as members of the Board of Directors. Included among them were Peter Scales, Charles Thompson, Dr. James W. Pendleton, Nathaniel Mills, David Anderson, Charles S. Jones, William Overton, C. G. Coleman and others. Copies of the proceedings were required to be filed annually with the Board of Public Works located in Richmond.

Charles R. Mason, mentioned before, was in charge of the labor forces for many years. This force, partly of slaves numbered close to a thousand people when they started effecting their own transportation. Depots and warehouses as well as water tanks had to be placed at the stops along the route. Many depot agents did long and faithful service at their respective points. To name a few there were James G. Pendleton at Beaverdam, N. W. Harris at Frederick Hall, H. W. Talley at Louisa, W. E. Netherland at Trevillians and R. P. Omohundro at Gordonsville. After 1847, the company had to double its labor forces to carry out the complete services.<sup>13</sup>

The company appeared well organized and run in the 1936-'50 period. Though the stockholders differed over the possible routes, the line should follow and over relations with the R.F. and P., the line declared dividends and provided regular year-round transportation service that could be depended upon.

\*There are many reasons why the subject of this article was of such interest to the author. One, his home was at Frederick Hall, the location of the line's first western terminus and of the home of Frederick Harris who was the first president of the railroad. Also, from Frederick Hall came Meade T. Spicer, a later vice-president of the line

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12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

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when it became known as the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. As a lad the author met train No. 45 for the Richmond paper that would be thrown off and often was thrilled to hear the Morse code sounded out in the depot where Messers Tom Garrett and T. A. Marston were agents. When the author attended Richmond College (1933-'37) Professor R. C. McDanel had him write about the railroad for his senior thesis. The thesis won the J. Taylor Elleyson medal for outstanding research. Additional material was used to expand the thesis to prepare documents to fulfill requirements for other degrees at the University of North Carolina and University of Minnesota. Finally in 1956 Garrett and Massie of Richmond published the material in book form entitled *Chessie's Road*. The author says "I have been working on the railroad" for many years.

**Contract for Hire of Slave\***

No 29 for \$115 Richmond Jan<sup>y</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> 1836  
On the first day of Jan<sup>y</sup> 1836 the Richmond  
Fredericksburg & Potomac Rail Road Company promise to  
pay Wilcox B. Clarke one hundred and fifteen dollars  
for the hire of Amistade, who is to be well clothed and  
well treated in all respects, not to work with Irish or distant  
labourers and to be returned at the end of year.  
Witness my hand and seal as President of the Company  
the day and year first above written.  
Should Amistade die I will pay it  
I do, A. Lancaster Pres<sup>nt</sup> Coy  
Wilcox B. Clarke

\*Papers of Dr. Charles W. Turner, Lexington, Virginia.