

The Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad

by Tony L. Crumbley

In 1833 the citizens of Wilmington went to Raleigh and asked for permission to bond a railroad running from Wilmington to Raleigh. Their request was denied by the state legislature in January 1834. With this defeat, the citizens went back to the legislature and requested permission to charter a company that would build the railroad. This was approved and overwhelmingly funded by the citizens of Wilmington. The original charter was to run the railroad from Wilmington to Raleigh. Because the citizens of Raleigh did not want the railroad coming to Raleigh, the line was changed at Faison to head towards Weldon where it could connect with the Richmond & Petersburg railroad. An

amendment of the charter was made in December 1835. The railroad would, however, continue to operate under the Wilmington & Raleigh name until 1855.

The actual construction of the line began in October 1836 and work was completed to Weldon on March 7, 1840. At this time the track ran 161½ miles and was the longest railroad line in the world. The track was 4 feet 8½ inches wide, the same as the Petersburg railroad but not the standard 5 feet of most southern railroads. The track was made of wood with a metal cap over the wood. The metal cap often would buckle under the weight of the train.



Figure 1 Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, red, March 27, 1844, paid 25 (ms); this folded letter originated in Havana, Cuba, and was shipped by brig Havana to Savannah (ms lower left). The cover was posted on the railroad on March 27, 1844 and forwarded to New York, the earliest known marking from this railroad. Harris Type II cds

Figure 2
Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, red, February 5, 1848, paid 18¾ (ms); this folded letter was posted at Fort Johnson, NC and is a request from Lt. Freeman to summon a witness to a forthcoming trial. Harris Type II cds





Figure 3 Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, red, October 27, 1846; this letter was posted in Charleston on October 26, 1846 and carried to Wilmington to be placed on board the railroad to Philadelphia.
Harris Type I cds, bold 10 (hs)

Between 1839 and 1844 the rail line operated two locomotives. The first, named Brunswick, was made by the Norris Locomotive Works of Philadelphia, PA. The second, named John C. Calhoun, was made by the Baldwin Locomotive Works, also of Philadelphia. Each company manufactured 1,000 locomotives between 1836 and 1860. Baldwin would continue to make locomotives until 1954 and was the greatest builder of locomotives in American history.

Between 1830 and 1839, 28 railroad companies were chartered in the State of North Carolina. Undoubtedly railroads were the talk of the communities. Only two of these, however, were built. From 1840 until 1845 no railroad companies were chartered. The depression of 1837 had put a halt to economic growth. By 1845, however, railroad companies began to pop up all over the nation.



Figure 5 Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, brown, January 11, 1848; the letter with bold 10 (hs) originated in Charleston and transferred to the railroad for passage to New York. The brown color ink is most likely oxidized red ink.
Harris Type III cds

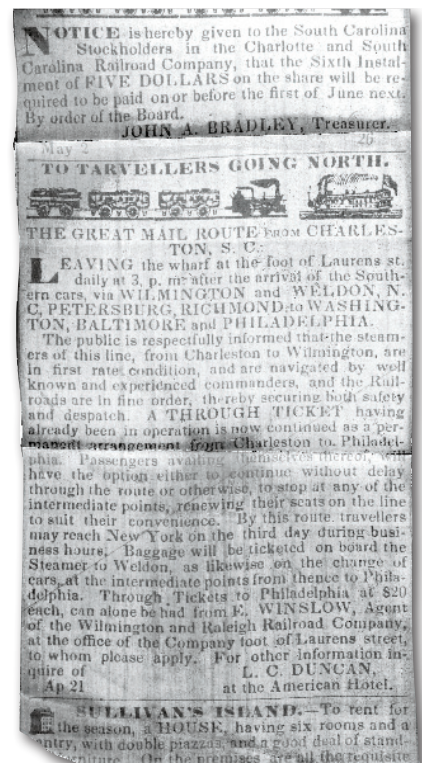


Figure 4 Notice published in Charleston Mercury, April 21, ca. 1846; giving details of steamship connecting with rail line in Wilmington.

From its earliest days, the railroad carried people, freight and mail. The Norris locomotive could carry 23 passengers and travel between 10 and 16 miles per hour, much faster travel than by stage or horseback. The first mail contracts with the Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad were executed in 1839. Route No. 2071 covered a short section from Weldon south

and Route No. 2072 a longer section from Wilmington north. The mail traveled by stage over the uncompleted section in the middle.

By 1844 and until 1851, the train made seven trips per week. From 1852 until 1860, the trips were increased to 14 per

Figure 6 ▶

Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, red, February 22, 1848; a pair of Scott #1 paying the 10 cent rate to New York from Charleston, SC to Ghent, Belgium. Letter posted February 19, 1848 on board the train from Wilmington. It was carried from the U.S. by the Cunard steamer Hibernia. Harris Type III cds



week. The 1851 station list was Wilmington, North East, Rocky Point, Burgaw, Washington, Teachey's, Strickland, Warsaw, Faison's, Dudley, Goldsboro, Washingta, Barden's Tossnot, Joyner's, Rocky Mount, Battles, Enfield, Halifax, Weldon.

One of the more unusual discoveries of mail carried on the Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad is that many of the covers

originated in Charleston, South Carolina, but have no Charleston postmarks. Four covers are known with Honour's city post carrier stamps, indicating they were handled by the private delivery service of Charleston. All direct travel at this time between Charleston and Wilmington was by steamer. Mail was carried by contact with a steamboat line. It is clear these letters must have been carried to the steamer line in Charleston without going through the Charleston post office,

Figure 7

Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, red, January 23, 1848, bold 5 (hs); this folded letter has no contents thus its origination is unknown. The Sherwood family ran a business in Wilmington so it was most likely mailed from Wilmington to Stricklands, NC. Harris Type III cds



and then handed directly to the railroad route agent in Wilmington.

Route agents were assigned to the Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad sometime before 1846. It made sense for mail to be carried to Wilmington from Charleston and placed on the railroad there as this was part of the great mail route. By the 1850's one could travel from Wilmington to New York by railroad in 70 hours.

Throughout the operation of the rail line as the Wilmington

& Raleigh, considerable mail was canceled by the route agent. Five different handstamps were used with ink colors of black, blue and red. Numerous handstamp rate markings are known. Two distinct "5" and six distinct "10" rate markings are known as well as manuscript rate markings.

In 1855 the railroad was renamed the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad. In 1872 it was leased to the Wilmington, Columbia and Augusta Railroad. This lease was ended in 1878 when the WC&A went bankrupt. In 1900 the W&R merged into the Atlantic Coast Railroad. ■



Figure 8 Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, blue, January 24, 1850, small 10 (hs); this folded letter originated in Charleston on January 23, 1850. It was delivered to the railroad the next day for transit to New York. There are six different 10 (hs) markings recorded on the Wilmington & Raleigh railroad covers. Harris Type III cds



◀ Figure 9 Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, blue, May 18, 1850, small 5 (hs); this ladies envelope was posted from Wilmington to Palmyra Springs, Mecklenburg County, VA. Harris Type III cds

Figure 10 ▶
Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, blue, January 9, 1851, midsize 10 (hs); this folded letter originated in Charleston on January 7, 1851. It entered the mail on the railroad January 9 for transit to New York. By 1851 the trip from Wilmington to New York took 70 hours. Harris Type III cds

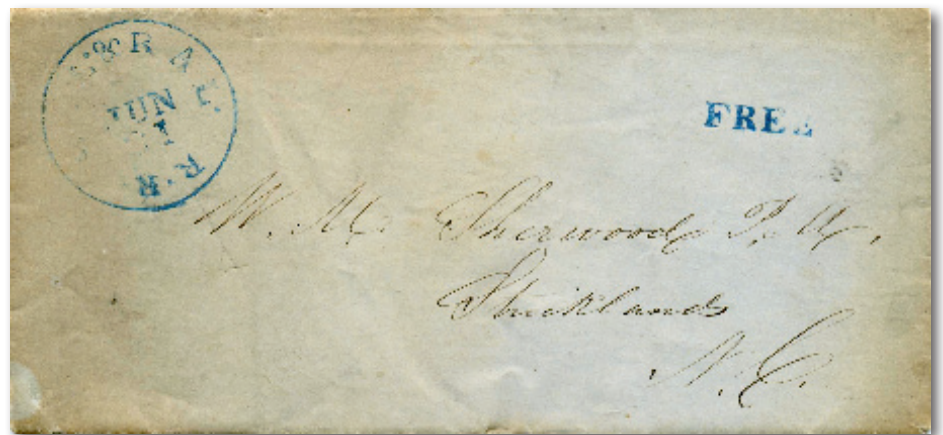


◀ Figure 11 Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, blue, January 28, 1851, slanted 10 (hs); in 1851 a new datestamp was introduced by the railroad route agent. This cover originated in Charleston on January 27 and was forwarded by rail to New York. Type 305-I-1



◀ Figure 12 Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, blue, December 3, 1851, midsize 5 (hs); this folded letter was posted from Wilmington on December 3 for delivery to Stricklands, NC. Type 305-I-1

Figure 13 ▶
Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad, blue, June 21, 1854, free (hs); W.M. Sherwood was a physician and postmaster in Stricklands. The cover in Fig 12 was posted to the doctor thus required 5 cents postage due. This cover was posted to him as postmaster and was sent free. Type 305-I-1



◀ Figure 14 Wilmington, NC, blue, February 15, ca. 1854; Honour's City Post was a privately operated mail and package delivery service that operated in Charleston from 1851 until 1858. It carried mail, mostly between businesses and hotels to the post office. This letter probably originated from a business and was carried by Honour's directly to the mail boat in Charleston for delivery to Wilmington. It entered the mail in Wilmington and was carried on the rail line to Philadelphia. Type 305-I-1

Sources:

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