

Lorton History - When Lorton Had a Station And train travel was a luxury

By Irma Clifton

Holiday travel time is fast approaching as many families go "over the river and through the woods" to Grandma's house. In fact, Thanksgiving is the most heavily travelled period of the year in this country. Today air travel, Interstate highways and high-speed trains help make holiday travel a little easier than it was in the past.

One mode of travel in this country, railroads, goes back more than 200 years. Back then, the tracks were short, but they still demonstrated that vehicles using rails could carry people, freight and other cargo. It was not until the second quarter of the 19th century though that a developing nation came to realize that trains could make travel both easier and speedier.

In Virginia during the 1830s several railroads began service, one of which was the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad (RF&P) chartered on February 25, 1834. It began service in 1836 from Richmond to Fredericksburg. Before that time, a trip from Richmond to Washington, DC was a 38-hour journey over dusty trails or muddy bogs, depending on the weather. With the inauguration of steamboat service from Aquia Landing in Stafford County the trip was shortened to only 24 hours. There was no rail service directly connecting Richmond with Washington. There was however, rail service provided along the short route of the Alexandria and Washington Railroad which opened in 1857. Travel was particularly arduous for women and children. This is the reason for prolonged visits; first you had to recover from the trip, then you could enjoy time spent with relatives and friends.

During the Civil War, the Union seized the four steamboats that provided service from Aquia to Washington effectively breaking a link of transportation between these two capitols even though it had been unsafe to do so. After the war, service was partially restored from Richmond to Hamilton's Crossing south of Fredericksburg where stagecoaches then completed the next leg of the journey to Potomac Creek in Stafford. From there, steamboats provided the last leg of the trip up the Potomac to Washington.

What spurred the rails to connect with the Alexandria and Fredericksburg Railroad in Quantico in 1872 were some particularly hard winters. The Potomac froze and was not navigable by boat. The Alexandria and Fredericksburg Railway, chartered in 1864 to continue the rail lines from Alexandria to Fredericksburg, eventually met up with the north end of the RF&P in Quantico to finally provide uninterrupted rail service between Richmond and Washington, a distance of about 113 miles of track. It is along this line that our own Lorton Station was erected.

Passengers, freight and maybe most importantly, mail was carried along these tracks and, until roadways were improved for longer distance travel, railroads served as Lorton's link to the rest of the nation. The station at Lorton has long been demolished but the name lives on as a housing development and a VRE station. Other stations in the area from the same period included Woodbridge, which was located near the south end of the Route 1 Bridge; Newington, also called Accotink which was an interchange

point with a branch that served Fort Belvoir and brought thousands of troops to that base during World War II; and Franconia, sometimes known as Springfield and today know as Franconia/Springfield, a stop on the VRE.

None of these stations are in existence any longer. The stations at Alexandria and Fredericksburg, which are of imposing brick construction still stand though only Alexandria is still used as a rail station. The building in Fredericksburg is now a restaurant. In the late 1980s CSX acquired two-thirds ownership of RF&P and purchased the remaining third in 1991. They eliminated use of the RF&P logo.

It may help, during these upcoming holidays, when you are standing in the security line at the airport, or sitting in traffic on the Interstate, or waiting for a delayed bus or train, to think about how long it took to get to Grandma's house in those early days. Let's just hope that like travel during the 19th century you won't have to recover from the trip before you can enjoy the visit!



