

THE FIRST RAILROAD WEST OF THE ALLEGHENIES

By

John S. Halbert

On North Main Street in downtown Tuscumbia, Alabama, is a historical marker at the site of the first railroad west of the Allegheny Mountains. How this railroad came to pass is one of the more interesting stories that is part of the saga of the Muscle Shoals area of North Alabama.

From earliest times, the principal barrier to transportation on the Tennessee River was the series of treacherous shoals between Florence and Decatur. The shoals came to be known as "Muscle Shoals," in a manner that has yet to be fully explained. Mussels---similar to oysters---were once harvested here, so the word "mussel" perhaps evolved to "muscle." Or maybe because it required so much "muscle" to navigate the shoals, Over time, the term "Muscle Shoals" came to identify the whole area. Regardless of the name, the shoals were impassable by steamer when Tuscumbia and Florence were thriving towns in the 1820's.

The first steamboat to reach the area probably arrived at the shoals about 1821, and by the middle of the decade, regular lines were serving the Muscle Shoals region. Steamers from the east ended their runs at Decatur; boats from the west stopped at Southport, where Sheffield, Alabama is located today, and at Florence, just up and across the river. The Muscle Shoals barrier made it necessary to haul passengers and goods by an overland route to connect the east-west debarkation points. At first, they established a stagecoach line. But before long, the shortcomings of horse-drawn transportation pointed up the need for a better way to haul goods past the rocky fords. The huge plantations to the east of Tuscumbia were producing thousands of bales of cotton a year, but were limited by the capricious nature of mule trains and the often-flooded shoals.

A group of prominent landowners formed the "Tuscumbia Railway Company", and in 1830 built a two-mile railroad from where the marker stands today down to the mouth of "Spring Creek" on the river. The railroad was an immediate success, and by 1834 the railroad extended all the way east to Decatur, a distance of about 40-miles. This was the first railroad west of the Alleghenies, the grandfather of all the railroads that would ultimately connect the eastern states to the west, and everything in-between. From all accounts, the line was superbly run, and at the time was probably the best equipped and managed in the world. The line was built at a cost of about \$4,000 per mile---a hefty sum in those days.

In 1851 the line was made a part of the "Memphis-Charleston Railroad" and served in the Civil War as an important transportation link for the South. Following much destruction of

equipment and tracks, the line was rebuilt after the war, and in 1898, the railway was incorporated into the "Southern Railway System", now "Norfolk Southern", where today it functions as part of the main east-west line from Memphis to Washington, D.C.

From humble beginnings as a two-mile horse-drawn line in Tuscumbia, Alabama, the first railroad west of the Alleghenies went on to become a major link in America's transportation system.