

The Louisville, Cincinnati & Charleston Rail Road: Dreams of Linking North and South

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Review

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Grant, H. Roger *The Louisville, Cincinnati & Charleston Rail Road: Dreams of Linking North and South*. Indiana University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-253-01181-7

A Railroad That Could Have Been

H. Roger Grant has written an interesting book about something that did not happen. Grant, author of thirty books and an expert on railroads in the United States, examines a proposed antebellum railroad that would have connected Charleston with Cincinnati in an unusual instance of intersectional planning. Construction did not proceed as planned and Grant uses the opportunity to speculate that a healthy LC & C would have influenced American history, perhaps to the point of changing the trajectory towards war. Railroad enthusiasts will certainly like this book -- it seems to be intended for a general audience -- but Civil War scholars should find the last chapter an interesting exercise in Civil War causation.

On July 4, 1836 nearly 400 delegates met in Knoxville to discuss the potential railroad. They elected Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina as the first president of the LC & C and formed committees to examine all aspects of construction. An early estimate pegged the cost at \$10,800, which would be approximately \$222.6 million today. Subscription books were opened and residents of South Carolina, Tennessee, and Ohio bought much of the stock. The states of South Carolina and Tennessee even pledged money to support the project. Company directors established the South-Western Rail-Road Bank to handle the finances and things seemed to be proceeding apace.

Despite this promising start, the railroad was bedeviled by problems. The level of technological and engineering expertise was an obvious issue. Surveying proposed routes for the line was difficult and dangerous work. Finding a way through the Appalachian Mountains was an even bigger obstacle. Bridging the Ohio River would be no easy task. When company officials selected a route that

would run along the French Broad River, they immediately split their backers into factions. Delegates from Georgia had already raised a stink about having the railroad pass through their state, but John Calhoun caused a greater problem. The "cast iron man," who was a delegate to Knoxville, insisted that the route go right past his plantation. Hayne, according to Grant, carefully examined Calhoun's plan and rejected it. As a consequence, Calhoun severed his ties with the LC & C and backed a distinctly southern railroad instead. The Panic of 1837 did not help matters but the company shouldered on and completed the line's extension to Columbia, South Carolina. A bigger blow came when Hayne died in 1839. James Gadsden became LC & C president and cast his lot with Calhoun when he pushed for a railroad across the South. The company fizzled out soon thereafter and the railroad merged with another intrastate line to become the South Carolina Rail Road. It was only during the Gilded Age that a direct line between Cincinnati and Charleston emerged.

Grant uses his narrative to touch on a number of important topics. For instance, despite the staggering estimate to build the LC & C, supporters did not shrink from their efforts to lay the rails. As Grant puts it on page 68, there was no "Jefferson nostalgia about defending the yeoman farmer" that prevented the delegates from dreaming about linking Charleston and Cincinnati. Many southerners, in other words, were not laggards when it came to internal improvements and attempts at industrialization. Nor were southerners concerned that the proposed railroad and the concomitant growth that it nourished would impair slavery. Grant dwells on these topics briefly and I would have appreciated more discussion on them. Another area where Grant could have provided stronger analysis concerns the interaction of the corporation with nature. Specifically, company literature promised that the new line would "break down the mountain barriers" (67, 92). Such statements about the ability of humans to impose their will on the natural world call for historical interpretation but there was painfully little environmental history in the book.

My dissertation advisor counseled me never to engage in counterfactual speculation in class because then the student knows as much as the professor. Such concerns aside, Grant delves into counterfactual speculation about the influence of a completed LC & C. Charleston did not have a good river to the interior and the LC & C would have served as a "classic developmental railroad" (154). He makes the interesting point that a healthy line would have benefitted Knoxville and Chattanooga, and perhaps even Greenville and Spartanburg. By contrast, Atlanta, which owed much of its vitality to railroads, probably would

have been smaller. All of this is quite plausible. Grant extends his speculation when discussing the potential reorientation of trade. The LC & C could have enhanced the closeness of the Old Northwest and the Atlantic South by facilitating commercial commitments and personal contacts. Many southerners believed that intersectional commerce checked abolitionism and strengthened unionism. In short, the failure of the LC & C might have contributed to the Civil War. Here, Grant relies on Marc Egnal and seems to be swimming against the current historiographical tide. Grant is a careful historian and he is not blaming the Civil War on the railroad's demise. The points he raises are worthy of consideration because they get to the root of how historians view the sectional conflict. In this case, a materialist interpretation is paramount but those who point to ideological reasons or the conflict over the expansion of slavery might not be convinced. Whether or not you agree with Grant's argument, he has written a well-researched book that should make you think about the antebellum South and the coming of the Civil War.

Robert Gudmestad is an Associate Professor at Colorado State University and the author of Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom. He is currently working on a study of gunboats on the Mississippi River system in the Civil War. You may reach him at Robert.Gudmestad@colostate.edu.