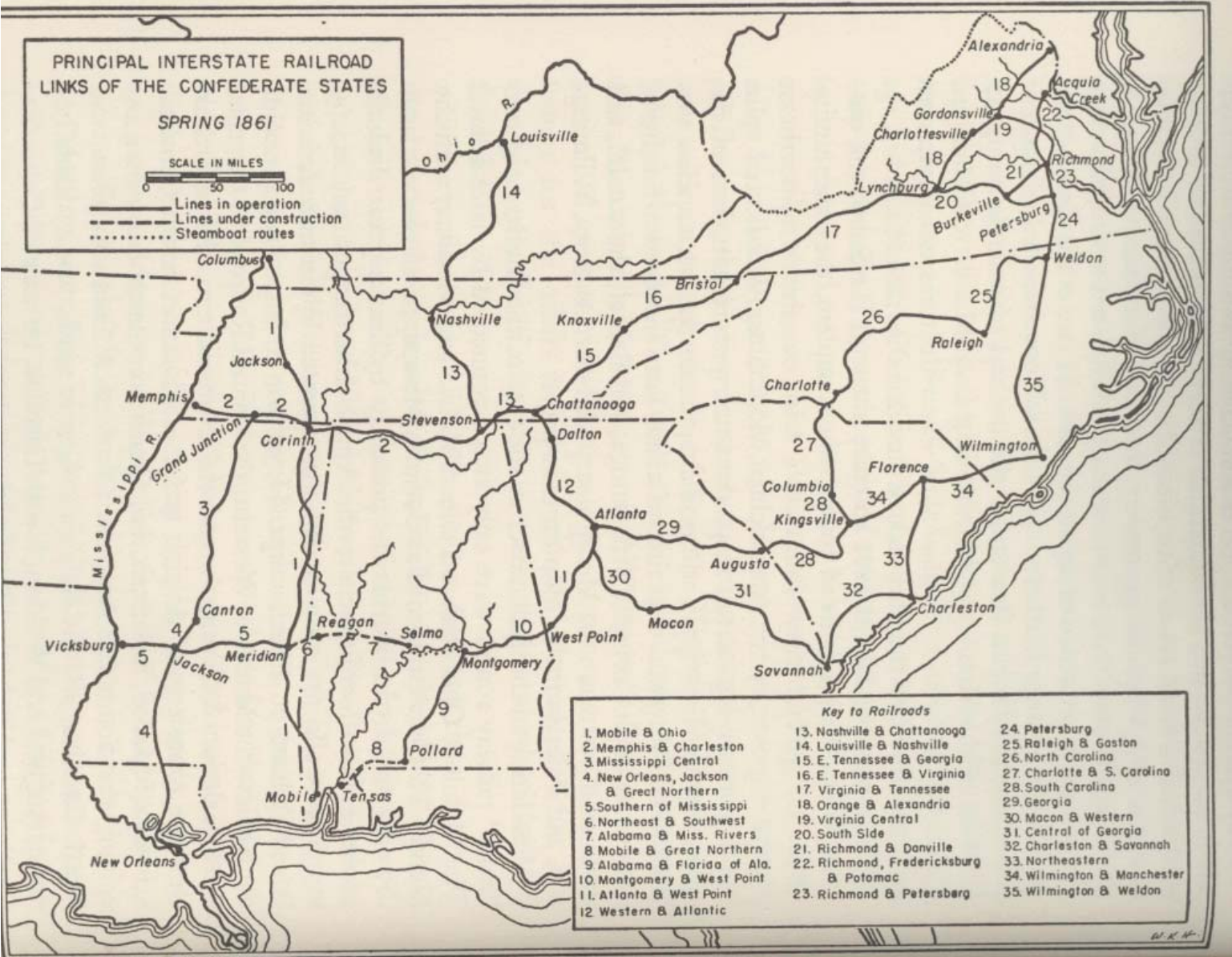




Railroads of the Confederacy



Moving Armies

The American Civil War was the first conflict in which railroads played a major role in moving and supplying large armies in the field. Both north and south raised large field armies of up to 100,000 men who could not be effectively supplied for any length of time except by railroad or water.

Union dominance of the waterways with gunboats and transports left the Confederacy dependent on their system of railroads to supply and move troops. Armies required an enormous mountain of supplies for operation including: rations, munitions, and fodder for horses and mules. The southern railroad system would be stretched to the breaking point by the requirement of supplying and moving the military.

Southern Rails

During the 1850s the southern railway system had expanded rapidly giving them an estimated mileage of 8,783 miles by 1861, more than the total of highly industrialized Great Britain. The northern states had more than double this, though, with 22,385 miles of railroad. This picture is deceptive, however, since the southern rail lines had unique problems. Many of their main lines were built in differing gauges with some of the tracks being five feet apart and others four feet 8 1/2 inches. Many railroad companies had their stations or terminus at the edge of major cities, while the other companies would have their station on the other side of town as was the case in Richmond, the Confederate capital. Thus, baggage would have to be unloaded, transported, and reloaded on the other side of town, or to cars on a different gauge line.

The southern railroads were built to get supplies from farm to port, and often did not make con-

nections with other lines. The only complete east-west system across the Confederacy was the Memphis and Charleston, sometimes referred to as the backbone of the Confederacy. It ran from Memphis, crossed the critical Mobile and Ohio, and continued by using the services of other lines to reach Charleston, South Carolina.

The south also lacked the industrial capacity to produce the quantity of rails, locomotives, rolling stock and other items needed to repair and maintain operation. The foundries capable of producing such items were soon put to work producing cannon and other iron products for the use of the Confederate Army and Navy. In addition, the tracks themselves were often not built to standards and had no ballest or embankment, but instead were laid on bare ground.

Early War Success

In spite of their shortcomings the Confederates were the first to use their railroad to effectively move troops and alter the course of battle. At first Manassas on July 21, 1861, Confederate forces moved over the Manassas Gap Railroad from the Shenandoah Valley, arriving just in time to turn the tide of battle. Again in April of 1862, the Confederacy was able to gather forces from all over the south to concentrate an army under Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston at Corinth, Mississippi and attack Gen. Grant at Shiloh.

However, in 1862, the north began to take over southern territory, especially in the west. Important Confederate rail lines with junctions at Nashville and Corinth were soon under Union control.

The U.S. Military Railroad organization was created to repair and operate captured rail lines as the Union Army used them for further invasion. They also became adept at rebuilding bridges that had been destroyed by the retreating Confederates.

In January of 1862, President Lincoln was given the authority by Congress to take over any railroad or telegraph for military use. Railroads in the north usually demonstrated a high level of cooperation with the Union war effort; while the south was hampered by uncooperative rail companies and governors who refused to let trains and rolling stock out of their control. The south would never achieve the level of cooperation and control that the Union rail system benefited from.

Destroying a Railroad

Partisans and cavalry from both sides learned to strike railroads at their most vulnerable points by destroying bridges, locomotives, and rolling stock to slow down or stop operations. Union sympathizers in east Tennessee would strike first in 1861 by destroying several bridges along the line between Chattanooga and Knoxville. The most daring mission occurred in the spring of 1862 when a civilian James Andrews led a group of 22 soldiers dressed as civilians to seize a locomotive, “The General” on April 12th at Big Shanty, Georgia. The plan was to travel north destroying bridges along the Western and Atlantic Railroad in order to cut off rail service to Chattanooga. Due to a rapid pursuit by the locomotive, “Texas,” Andrew’s raid failed, and most of the men were captured. Eight of them were hung as spies and the raiders were the first to be awarded the newly established Medal of Honor.

One of the most effective raiders was Confederate General Nathan B. Forrest. In December 1862,

Forrest struck the railroads in West Tennessee destroying trestles and railroad equipment. This raid, combined with Gen. Earl Van Dorn’s destruction of the supply depot at Holly Springs, Mississippi, caused Grant to call off his first attempt to advance on Vicksburg and switch from railroads to the river to supply his invading forces.

Gen. William T. Sherman’s men would become masters at destroying railroads by pulling up the rails, heating them over burning rail ties, and then twisting them around telegraph poles. These became known as “Sherman’s Neckties”. The twist in the rail made it impossible to easily straighten them out and use them again. Sherman’s men would get the chance to destroy the key Confederate railroad and industrial center of Atlanta in the fall of 1864.

Protecting a Railroad

During the Atlanta Campaign in 1864, Sherman and his army were dependent on a vulnerable railroad supply line running from Nashville to Chattanooga. To protect this critical link from raiders, the Union army built a series of blockhouses and earthworks along the line. Railroad shops and repair facilities were constructed in Chattanooga and Nashville. Major fortifications were built around Nashville, Chattanooga, and Murfreesboro, such as “Fortress Rosecrans,” to protect supply depots and railroad operations. To keep Forrest from attacking this vulnerable lifeline,

Sherman sent invading forces into Mississippi which resulted in Union defeat at Brice’s Crossroads, but kept that “Devil” Forest occupied.

The effective use and control of the railroads would ultimately win the war for the Union while the Confederate rail system would be left in chaos by war’s end. Future wars would see an increased use of railroads to mobilize troops, move supplies, and employ many of the same strategies to provide victory by rail.



Blockhouses protecting the railroad over the Cumberland River at Nashville, Tennessee