

# The Louisville & Nashville Railroad

By Tim Asher

When the Louisville & Nashville Railroad was chartered in Kentucky in 1850, it was one of the South's first railroads and one of only a very few to grow into a major system without a name change. The railroad was necessary to help Louisville better compete with Cincinnati, OH for business and commerce. By 1855, those advocating the construction of the L&N had raised nearly \$3 million. The first train to operate over the railroad ran on August 25, 1855, when some 300 people traveled eight miles from Louisville at a breakneck speed of 15 mph. Its 185-mile main line between Louisville, Ky. and Nashville, Tenn. opened in 1859. The total cost of this original construction was \$7,221,204.91.



The Louisville and Nashville Railroad was known as Old Reliable. It was a small regional railroad until after the Civil War when it expanded into a major railroad system serving the South and Midwest. The rail line reached from Louisville, to Atlanta, to Louisiana, and northward to Chicago. The L&N played a major role in the rise of southern industry and the growth of the steel industry. In fact, the services and financial support of the L&N were essential to the development of the eastern Kentucky coal fields. Since the 1960s the L&N has undergone a series of mergers and continues operation today as part of the CSX Transportation system.

The L&N Railroad's second board president was Elizabethtown native and twice Governor of the Commonwealth John L. Helm. He was the grandson of Thomas Helm who was one of the first pioneer families to move to Kentucky from Virginia in 1779. Gov. Helm was a man of influence in the Commonwealth for most of his life. He was a wealthy, large land owner overseeing several thousand acres and owning over 100 slaves.



Gov. John L. Helm

The decision to locate the railroad in its present route through Hardin County traversing Muldraugh's hill was not an easy one. Muldraugh's hill was an imposing escarpment to overcome for the engineers and labors of the time. This natural impediment rose about 500 feet from the floor of the Rolling Fork River valley in steep hills that are crisscrossed by deep gorges and streams. The primitive locomotives of the day could climb only a few degrees incline per mile so the obvious solution was to look for a route elsewhere.

Gov. Helm served as president of the railroad while the decision was made regarding the route south out of Jefferson Co. He insisted that the railroad be constructed through what was known as the “lower pike” through Muldraugh’s hill and Elizabethtown. Gov. Helm faced opposition from those stockholders who favored an optional route known as the “upper pike” which was planned to travel in the direction of Bardstown and Glasgow. The advantage of the “upper pike” was that the topography was a little more forgiving than the severe rise in elevation of the “lower pike” from the bottom of the hill at what later became the town of Colesburg to the top of the hill at Elizabethtown. The final decision however would not be made by engineers or other professionals doing the work, but rather by the citizens of Hardin (lower pike) or Nelson (upper pike) counties who would provide the money to build the railroad by voting, either up or down, for financing in the form of large bonded debts.



This deliberation came to a conclusion much like we see in all worthy public projects today. Not only do you need hard work, a lot of money, and the consensus of the people to succeed but also a generous proportion of political maneuvering. You need a good game plan and Gov. Helm had a winner. You see, while Gov. Helm and another Hardin County millionaire and L&N stockholder Samuel Beal Thomas canvassed the county to secure a vote for railroad bonded debt of \$300,000 over here. A well respected and distinguished attorney in Bardstown named Ben Hardin was working to see that the bonded debt proposal was voted down in Nelson County. The twist was that Ben Hardin was the father-in-law of Gov. Helm and thus playing his role in the plan to make sure the Railroad ran through Hardin County. In the end, the Helm, Hardin, and Thomas trio succeeded when Hardin Co. voted for the bonds and Nelson Co. voted them down. This insured that the railroad would run through Hardin County.

With that said, not all ran smoothly during the course of the bond raising campaign and for a while it appeared that the proposition would fail in Hardin Co. This called for some additional “arm twisting” and Gov. Helm with his influence, fortune and political skills saw the key to success. He traveled to the Meeting Creek precinct on the Hardin/Grayson Co. line to make a proposal. This precinct was one of the more remote from the railroad and would possibly benefit the least of any in the county. In a speech, Gov. Helm told the citizens of this small precinct that if they voted for the railroad bond, that he in turn would pay their property taxes out of his pocket. In the end, the good folks of Meeting Creek took him at his word and voted for the bonds. As a result the measure passed and Gov. Helm, to his credit, paid their property taxes out of his pocket until his death in 1867.

The shareholders subsequently elected Gov. Helm Chairman of the board of the L&N and Samuel Beal Thomas was elected as a board member to boot. The interests of Hardin County were well represented on the L&N Board with the election of these two men. As the chairman, Helm also had a provision placed in the L&N Charter that all trains would stop in the county seat (Elizabethtown) of Hardin Co. This provided that Elizabethtown

would enjoy the maximum economic benefit from this new mode of transportation and further insured the continued increase of Helm's fortune.

The L&N had 269 miles of track in 1861 when the Civil War began. The L&N served both the Union and the Confederacy at various times during the war. However after the Confederates were driven from Kentucky in early 1862, the Union used the L&N masterfully to "drive a stake in the heart of the Confederacy" from that point until the end of the war in 1865. In the end, the L&N proved to be one of the primary determining factors in the Western Theater of the War. The railroad moved huge quantities of food, forage, and the supplies of war from all over the industrial north to the Union depot at Louisville to the huge depot at Nashville to be distributed to the armies invading and occupying the Deep South. Although the railroad was a constant target and suffered considerable damage during the war, it emerged in surprisingly good financial condition. In fact, when the shooting finally stopped it was so well off that the L&N began a period of unprecedented expansion. Within a period of 30 years, through construction and acquisition of existing short railroads, the L&N extended its tracks to St. Louis, Missouri, Cincinnati, Ohio, Birmingham and Mobile, Alabama, Pensacola, Florida, and New Orleans, Louisiana.

During World War II, the L&N and other railroads were called on to move unprecedented numbers of passengers and amounts of freight for the military. More than 90 percent of the nation's military equipment and supplies and 97 percent of all its troops traveled by rail to military bases and ports on their way to fight in the European or Pacific Theaters of war. During the war, L&N traffic experienced an increase of 80 percent in freight traffic and more than 300 percent in passenger traffic.



Elizabethtown Depot 1922

Two technological events served as bookends to World War II as the L&N railroad experience striking changes. Those bookend events saw the purchase of the first diesel in 1939 and the laying to rest of the "Old Iron Horse" when the last steam locomotive was retired in 1957. More improvements were to come in the following years with the introduction of streamlined passenger service. The L&N also gradually updated the equipment on other passenger trains to emulate the newer more comfortable models being introduced. Technology marched on as the L&N moved into the electronic age employing pushbutton electronic classification freight yards at major cities, computers, telecommunications and microwave transmission. The L&N improved its rolling stock by having hundreds of miles of continuously-welded rail, new signaling and centralized traffic dispatching systems and thousands of special-purpose freight cars.

In 1969, the L&N operated more than 6,574 miles of track in 13 states and was at the zenith of its power. However, during that year the Seaboard Coastline Railroad, which

for many years had owned 35percent of the L&N's stock moved to buy the remainder of the outstanding shares. The result was that the L&N had now become the wholly-owned subsidiary of Seaboard Coast Line Industries. On December 31, 1982, the corporate entity known as the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company was officially merged into the Seaboard System Railroad. This ended the L&N's 132-year existence under a single name. And finally in 1986, the Seaboard System and the Chessie System merged to become CSX Transportation.

Source: <http://www.railga.com/ln.html>  
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