

Rails Through the Wiregrass: A History of the Georgia and Florida Railroad. By H. Roger Grant. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006. xvi + 223 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, maps. Cloth, \$36.00. ISBN: 0-875-80365-2.

Reviewed by Sean Patrick Adams

The history of railroading in the United States is replete with success stories. First movers like the Baltimore & Ohio or transcontinental pioneers like the Union Pacific have attracted the attention of scholars for decades and will continue to capture the imagination of both professional and amateur railroad historians. But what about the less successful regional ventures? Who tells their story? More important, perhaps, is the question of whether their story is even worth telling. H. Roger Grant's monographic study of the Georgia and Florida (G&F) Railroad, *Rails Through the Wiregrass*, offers at least a partial response to this question. Readers will find his picture of the G&F, a company that spent most of its existence in receivership and enjoyed only sporadic fits of fiscal and commercial prosperity, both evocative and limited at the same time.

This is a work of thorough archival research that traces the history of the G&F from its late-nineteenth-century roots through its sale to the Southern Railroad in 1963. The G&F was an amalgam created around 1905 from several short lines connecting small market centers in Georgia. The railroad hoped to serve as a major thoroughfare linking Columbia, South Carolina, with important cities like Savannah, Georgia, and Tampa, Florida. Such grandiose plans, however, never really materialized, and, like many southern lines in the early twentieth century, the G&F suffered from a crippling blend of unrealistic expectations, capital shortages, and failed contracts. The individual behind the consolidation of these lines, John Skelton Williams, was a "pompous, thin-skinned, short-tempered, and even vindictive" man who even by the standards of the time was considered a racist with an "exceedingly negative view of people of color" (p. 24). Thus, from the very beginning of *Rails Through the Wiregrass*, Grant eliminates any suspicion that he is crafting a hagiographic version of the G&F's history.

By 1915 the G&F carried both freight and passenger traffic along their line between Augusta, Georgia, and Madison, Florida; the line also went into financial receivership. Despite the initial success of its excursion packages, the G&F suffered from bad labor relations and a shortage of freight receipts in its early years. Conditions improved in the 1920s, most notably with the introduction of the *Bon-Air Special* linking Augusta to Jacksonville, Florida. By early 1927, the company had climbed out of receivership and was contemplating the addition of several branch lines to its system. But, as Grant ably demonstrates throughout this book, prosperity for the G&F was always fleeting. An extension to Greenwood, South Carolina, kicked off in the ominous year of 1929; financial ruin during the Great Depression followed almost immediately; and the G&F went into receivership for the next thirty-four years. “When it rained,” Grant argues, “it poured on the G&F, literally and figuratively” (p. 98).

The main strength of the book is its emphasis upon the developmental aspects of the railroad. The “Wiregrass Region” of Georgia was a relatively untapped agricultural region when the G&F took shape. The usual suspects in the South’s economy—lumber, cotton, and tobacco—all experienced increases with the railroad’s encouragement. Most interesting is Grant’s account of the attempts by the G&F to promote the consumption of watermelons in the 1920s. Managers circulated, for example, promotional literature that argued, “Every member of the human family should eat WATERMELONS at least once daily during the watermelon season” (p. 112). The G&F also ran “Watermelon Specials” in order to capture new markets for the perishable fruit from the Wiregrass Region. Not surprisingly, the directors of the G&F missed out on the opportunity to promote what would become the most famous crop from the region, the Vidalia onion. Although Grant suggests that the line had a positive impact on the area’s development, it seemed that the G&F also missed several opportunities to harness the economic potential of the Wiregrass Region.

The main drawback to *Rails Through the Wiregrass* is that these kinds of connections to the larger scope of Southern history are not well developed. Few comparisons are made with other regional lines, and the political impact of the Georgia & Florida is completely absent. The treatment of labor relations is most disappointing. Grant does not hide the fact that the G&F experienced friction between workers and

management, including some major strikes. But rather than analyze efforts by the line to enforce a paternalistic, even nepotistic, hold on their employees, the experience of managers and workers on the railroad receives only brief treatment. By following the connections between the G&F and the wider political economy of the twentieth-century South, Grant might have made more of a case for the significance of this troubled line and perhaps appealed to a wider audience.

Critics of the G&F joked that the line stood for “Gone & Forgotten,” but Grant dispels this notion with a well-constructed corporate history that emphasizes the difficulties of building railroads in the American South and the problems that plagued railroads of all stripes. Despite the missed opportunities to link the G&F’s stories to the larger narrative of Southern business and labor history, Grant offers an interesting account of a lesser-known railroad. What the book lacks in breadth of scope, moreover, it makes up for in depth of solid archival research. *Rails Through the Wiregrass* thus adds an important component to the growing body of literature documenting the economic transformation of the American South in the twentieth century.

*Sean Patrick Adams is associate professor of history at the University of Florida. He is the author of Old Dominion, Industrial Commonwealth: Coal, Politics, and Economy in Antebellum America (2004), and he is currently working on a study of heating technology in nineteenth-century America and a history of Florida’s early railroads.*