
Warren County Historical Tidbits: On Warrenton Railroad

Three Miles of Rail For A Song...Well, Almost

As kids, we sang at the top of our lungs as **London** Bridge was falling down...we found out that Tony Bennett left his heart in **San Francisco**...Frank Sinatra made it in **New York, New York**...The Doobie Brothers were talkin' 'bout **China Grove**...ZZ Top rocked on about **La Grange** and George Strait made it to **Amarillo** by morning. Seems like a few towns and cities get all the press in songs...until...a few months back as I was working on a story for something *completely* unrelated, I went to the 2nd page of Google and saw a link for "**On Warrenton Railroad**" – **Song**. Now this looked interesting! So I clicked thru and found that we have a custom song, written just for us. In just 7 verses this 1877 composition kicks off the story of the shortest Railroad in the country – the 2.9 mile Warrenton Railroad.

I think I'm going to let the song start our story, with just a little in the way of facts and figures tossed in for those who don't know about our famous Short Line. But first, just a word of warning...we have the words, but unfortunately no tune written down, so feel free to make up whatever tune you think fits! Mr. J.D. Lewis of Little River, SC gives us a great snapshot of this epic railroad's story: "The Warrenton Railroad was a 2.9-mile connector line from Warren Plains to Warrenton. It operated from 1884 until 1985 when the line was closed down."



Why we ever needed a railroad running from Warren Plains to Warrenton is an interesting story in and of itself. When railroads were deemed safe for public transportation in the 1830's after a number of people survived the blistering speeds of 20 mph, businesses also saw an opportunity to move freight in addition to people throughout the state. So in 1840, NC's first railroad (and in fact the longest railroad in the **WORLD** at that time) was completed by the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad Company from Wilmington to Weldon. Close on their heels as the 2nd North Carolina railroad was the Raleigh & Gaston Railroad. As it was being constructed, the surveyors appeared in Warren County in 1838 planning to come through Warrenton. It seems that the local leaders did not want the railroad and saw no good that could come of its path through Warrenton. So, to make sure their opposition was clear, they sent armed men out to meet the survey crew. Valuing their lives above a railroad, the Raleigh & Gaston engineers immediately decided that they could just as easily take the track thru Warren Plains and hopefully grow to a ripe old age as a result.

In eighteen hundred and seventy-six,
With an effort partly crowned,
A railroad bed they did affix,
From Warren Plains to town.
Some people said it would not pay,
To steam a road so short,
Dick and Bill would have their way,
So to make it pay they ought.

CHORUS.—For Ayers and Kingsland, hand in hand,
Did grade this road bed in our land,
But now they are gone, what shall we do,
To put the Warrenton railroad through.

Verse 1 & Chorus of Song

President of the Board joined by a number of prominent Warren County residents.

As a President and talking gent,
Dick Kingsland did his best,
To make it foot up every cent,
The board was left the rest.
A hearty working by us all,
To get the road in motion,
And not to let the fever fall,
Was just friend Richard's notion.—CHORUS.

As they have a splendid board,
Men well informed and fair,
It would be better for the road
To build to Court-house square.
Crowds will go by moon and sun,
To see the trains come through,
'Twill put new life in Warrenton,

Song Verses 2 & 3

Well Bill, the day I missed your face,
And was showed your true condition,
A sheet was signed up in this place,
Called by railroad men petition.
They sent it up to that grand show,
Where all laws are made, if any,
It wished us taxed three thousand more,
And railroad bonds as many.—CHORUS.

So the Legislature passed the act,
It went through like a dream,
To lay upon our town the tax,
To give this road more steam.
It also passed the other joke,
Which sounds to me so funny ;
These railroad bonds they wished to soak
At ninety cents for money.—CHORUS.

Song Verses 4 & 5

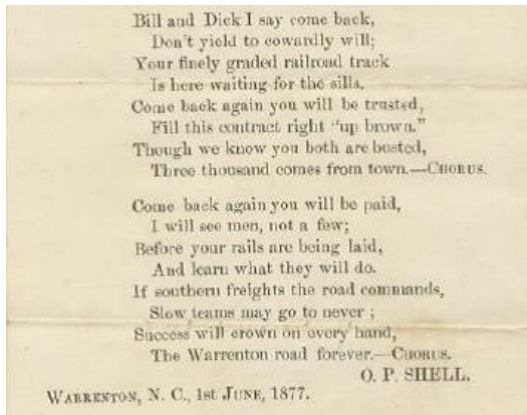
the railroad and plea to Kingsland & Ayers. Great question! You see, in the 1800's and earlier, songs like this, called "broadsheets", were a fairly effective means of advertising. The only real mass media at the time was newspapers and magazines...both important information sources, but rather passive promotional tools. The idea in 1877 with this song was much like a posting today on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram...the writer hoped that it would go viral and promote their cause for very little, if any, money invested. So copies of the song were printed on broadsheets and handed out on street corners, at stores and especially at saloons and taverns. If the song caught on, then everywhere you went people would be singing, "On Warrenton Railroad"...and hopefully the railroad construction would begin again.

As Reconstruction ended in 1876, Warrenton town leaders realized that in order to thrive, the town needed a rail line that came into Warrenton as opposed to the wagon services that had transported passengers for the past 36 years. According to our song, Richard Kingsland (President) & William H. Ayers (Contractor) were the first drivers of this project and began work in earnest grading the bed with mule teams and local workers. J. D. Lewis' website cites that Nat Jones, Sheriff of Warren County, was named

In this first venture, it seems that everything was progressing nicely. The town residents were excited...everyone was behind this new project. Then, before a cross-tie was laid, money apparently dried up and Mr. Kingsland and Mr. Ayers left town...where they went to was not noted.

With that, two things happened that seemed to re-energize the push to build the railroad. First, State Senator John W. Cunningham of Person County (who had married Martha Helen Somerville of Warren County) introduced legislation forwarded from town leaders for a special election to see if the Town of Warrenton would subscribe \$3,000 in subscription towards the line. Approved, this money was somehow used for this project without much in the way of results. The second encouraging development was the support of Mr. O. (Oliver) P. Shell of Warren County. Mr. Shell had run a lucrative hack service for a number of years from the Warren Plains Depot into Warrenton and back. His first contribution to our railroad was writing this song on 1 June 1877.

But before we continue, I'll bet you're wondering why in the world he wrote a song with his pitch for



Song Verses 6 & 7

History doesn't note whether or not this tune led the Warrenton Hit Parade; however, since final rail construction wouldn't start for another 6 years and the first train wouldn't run until 8 November 1884, my guess is that our missing tune to the lyrics did not strike the fancy of Warren County residents.

Now, back to our story, already in progress...Mr. Shell didn't give up. Joining him to boost the railroad was local businessman, Willie White (yes, the same Capt. Willie White of Warrenton who met Robert E. Lee at the Warren Plains Depot in 1870), who touted the railroad at every opportunity. To sweeten the pot, Shell offered to build a depot in Warrenton and purchase an engine once the

railroad was complete – two promises he kept in 1884. With these two local men leading the project and an apparent increase in the subscription amount by the Legislature to \$10,000 rail service to Warrenton a reality at last. As an interesting cap to this part of our story, when the Warrenton Railroad made its initial run, O. P. Shell was on the rear platform acting as Conductor.

I've got another entire Tidbit's worth of information about our Warrenton Railroad while it was up & running to tell, but time and space dictate that we need to leave the rest of our story for another day. So, there you have it...the song that launched a railroad! Well, sort of. In any case, when you consider that the rail service lasted for 101 years, long past the time when other railroads had ceased operations, we have quite a story to tell here in Warren County.

Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...

"Warren County Historical Tidbits" is a project of The Chamber of Commerce of Warren County.