# Warren County Historical Tidbits: The Warrenton Railroad Part II, In-Town
Main Street Tracks and Bygone Depots

When we last left the story over a month ago of our one-of-a-kind railroad here in Warrenton, it was 1884 and the Warrenton Railroad had just begun operations. No doubt, many of you have a lot of questions about the next 101 years (as did I). So, let's take a look at what we know…and see the interesting story that develops…
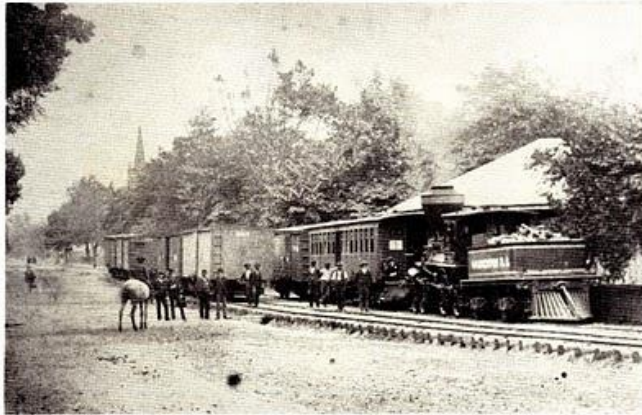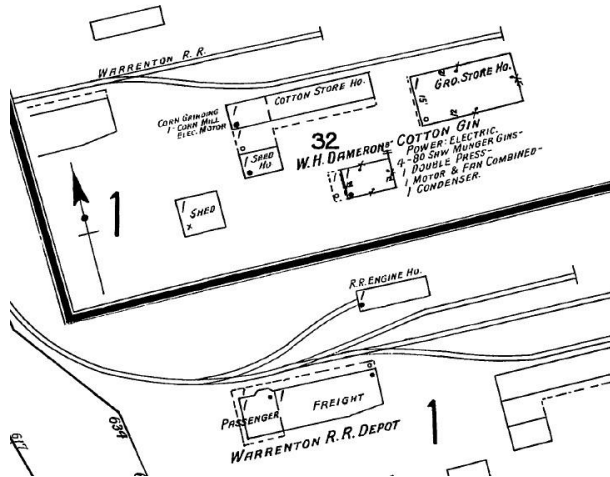

WARRENTON'S OWN RAILROAD

This picture, taken in the late 1880's, shows the tracks and train owned by the town of Warrenton. The depot is in the north part of town, and in the distance rises the spire of Emmanuel Church. Captain O. P. Shell, conductor, and prime mover of the railroad enterprise, stands nearest the engine, recognizable by his long white beard.

From *The County of Warren, North Carolina*
by Manly Wade Wellman, 1959

The biggest question in my mind has always been: "Where exactly did this line run?" I know from historians that it "generally followed Warren Plains Road into town, occasionally ducking into the undergrowth to maintain a straight line…" And I know that in front of one house on Warren Plains Road today you can still see the old cross ties next to the road for about 100 feet. But it seems that to really uncover the entire route, we're going to need to do a little digging…and I think the picture to your left from the late 1880's might well serve as our shovel!

Here are the facts that we know: 1) The Warrenton Railroad Charter was for 2.9 miles. 2) One end was at the Warren Plains Depot on the Raleigh & Gaston Railroad lines and the other at the "north part" of Warrenton…not very specific 3) The old depot (passenger & freight) for the Warrenton Depot that most residents of Warren County remember, stood on today's Depot Street off the east side of North Main Street. It burned in 1982 after being renovated by the Warrenton Woman's Club.

Beyond those simple facts, there is really no additional information in any of the historical accounts of our county…So it looks like we're going to have to use this one old picture to tell the rest of the story.

Warrenton Railroad Depot built 1907 on Old Depot Street

October 27, 1962: "Our State" magazine dedicated their entire issue to Warren County…well worth an in-depth read if you ever get the chance. When it comes to our railroad they note that in the early days, the railroad came to the edge of downtown. In 1907, a new depot and yard was laid out further north. It seems from Sanford Fire maps of the town (inset to the left) that it was after that date when the Warrenton R.R. Depot began showing up.
So, what about before 1907?

Let's see…As you'll remember, two of the driving forces behind establishing this rail line in Warrenton were Capt. Willie White (of the Robert E. Lee visit fame) and Mr. O. P. Shell, who ran a hack service from the Warren Plains depot to Warrenton and beyond after the Civil War and wrote the song for our railroad. The caption above identifies Mr. Shell next to this train identified by his long white beard. Shell promised to build a depot and buy an engine when the line began operation…so I think we can safely assume the engine above and the low building to the right of the train are those promises kept. But where was it located?

Consider this…if you drive from the Warren Plains Depot today, 2.9 miles takes you right to the intersection of Main and Macon Streets (where the old hotels of the 19th century were located). It is only 2.5 miles along that same path to Depot Street. *????* The "missing" .4 miles means that the rail **had** to continue straight into town past Depot Street. Then accounting for two spurs to Peck and the Furniture factory – ending about where First Citizens Bank stands today. With those points of reference in place, the above pictured depot would have stood in the 200 block of North Main Street*, right* where the brick, two-story house stands today.

That answers a lot of questions…why the 200 block of North Main Street is so much wider – (they needed room for the train to stop and still allow horses and carriages to pass). It also answers why the previous owners of our home found railroad spikes buried in the yard near Main Street. And it fills in a few details about the early years of the Warrenton Railroad.

Now thru the years, the Warrenton Railroad had a number of engines (7 by my count)…never really needing more than one at a time. As a kid at heart, every one of them is just very interesting to me; however, I have to say that the "Bicentennial Themed" engine to our left is one of my favorites. It's identified as "#7" and likely the last to run the rails from Warren Plains to Warrenton.

I've read of plenty of "short line railroads" around the country, but never one owned by a town or one that operated for so long. However you slice it, it seems that we have yet another unique part of our story for which we can be justly proud!

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.