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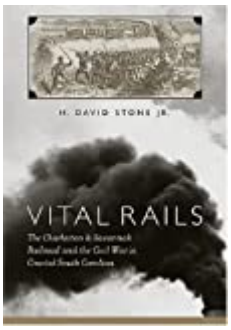

H. David Stone, Jr. *Vital Rails: The Charleston & Savannah Railroad and the Civil War in Coastal South Carolina.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. xiii + 369 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-716-0.

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Confederate Low Country Railroad

Dr. H. David Stone Jr., a physician residing and practicing in Florence, South Carolina, wrote this work as a labor of love. Stoneâs great-great-grandfathers served the Confederacy and the state of South Carolina during the War Between the States, and both grandfathers used or defended the Charleston & Savannah Railroad during the struggle. Fascinated with railroads since boyhood, and inspired by a now deceased professor at Furman University, Stone set out to chronicle the history of the Charleston & Savannah Railroad from its creation in the late antebellum period through its sale and renaming in 1867. Stoneâs work is not thesis-driven, but is a chronicle of a railroad that has suffered from historical neglect. During the Civil War the rails provided the armies with men, materials, and munitions; therefore, their role was vital in the conduct of war, and this was especially true of the Charleston & Savannah line.

The Charleston & Savannah officially opened for business on April 21, 1860, only a few days before the fateful Democratic National Convention that met in Charleston resulting in the party split that helped push the nation toward civil war. Before the outbreak of war, the Charleston & Savannah served as a means to abate the commercial isolation of the low country section of the two states, but with the beginning of the conflict, the railroad took on a military purpose. The line had been the creation of its president, Thomas Fenwick Drayton, and Charles Jones Colcock, a prominent investor. Built with state government funds and gangs of slave labor, the line was a commercial success. The war did not totally alter its use for passenger service, but military use did take precedence.

Throughout the early stages of the struggle, âthe influx of government travel along the coast had also exposed the most glaring deficiency of the railroad–its lack of a connection with other railroads in Charlestonâ (p.72). Worse, the line became the target of the Unionâs legendary general William T. Sherman, who announced his intention to seize the railroad. It was not until nearly the end of the war that the Charleston & Savannah fell into Union hands. According to the author, the worst fear of General Robert E. Lee, the Confederate comman-

der in the area, âwas a strong advance on the Charleston & Savannah Railroad â¦ such an attack at the head of the Broad River would cut the rail connection–and thus the movement of supply and reinforcements between the two cities–and allow movement on either city with combined ground and naval assaultsâ (p. 76). This fear moved Lee to build massive earthworks to protect the line.

The strategic importance of railroads such as the Charleston & Savannah did not make their tasks easier either in regular commerce or the military effort. The lack of regulation âwas jeopardizing the entire war effort,â and success would elude them without cooperation between âthe government, the military, and each otherâ (p. 83). Despite the difficulties in coordination, the Charleston & Savannah was better at coordination and cooperation than its competitors. The line benefited from that fact that the âarmy and the railroad needed one another,â and that âGeneral Drayton and General Lee had prior experience with railroad politics as they applied to the militaryâ (p. 85). Although the Richmond government dispatched Lee to Virginia on March 4, 1862, he left the Charleston & Savannah with the âfoundation of an effective defensive line that was tested many times in the coming yearsâ (p. 90).

Despite repeated attacks by the Federals on the railroad, the Confederates pushed back attacks on the railroad at Pocotaligo, Honey Hill, and other key points along the line. The troops defending the Charleston & Savannah Railroad managed to preserve it until the fall of Savannah in December 1864, which âsealed the fate of the Charleston & Savannah Railroad … and the fate of the city of Savannahâ (p. 245). By February 1865, the Charleston end of the line had ceased to function. At the end of the conflict, the company attempted to regain its former strength, but debts and rebuilding costs resulted in its sale to the Savannah & Charleston Railroad on January 31, 1867.

The Charleston & Savannah played a significant role in service to the Confederacy, but it could not overcome the hordes of Yankees led by Sherman and his commanders. Nevertheless, as Stone concludes his work, he reminds us that âthe story of the railroad is the story of the Union soldier and the Confederate, the planter and the slave, the railroad capitalist, manager, and workmen.â In addition, âthe actions of the men who built it, defended it, captured and destroyed it, placed as much on their mark on the road as those who reclaimed it, bought and sold it, and further developed itâ (p. 315).

Stone gives his readers a chronicle of an important railway and the role it played in the Confederate war effort. Naturally, Civil War academicians and Civil War history buffs will find much of interest in Stoneâs history, but business historians, railroad enthusiasts, and readers of South Carolina history will also find the work a fascinating reading experience. It might serve to refer to this work as centered on Civil War-era business, because the business practices, understanding, and skill of the Charleston & Savannahâs managers is also a large part of its story. The book contains several helpful maps, photographs of the area as it appears today, and many other portraits of the businessmen and military figures involved in the fight over the Charleston & Savannah. Written by an amateur historian, this is an excellent work. One can only hope it will result in similar works about the importance of other railroads in the Civil War.

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