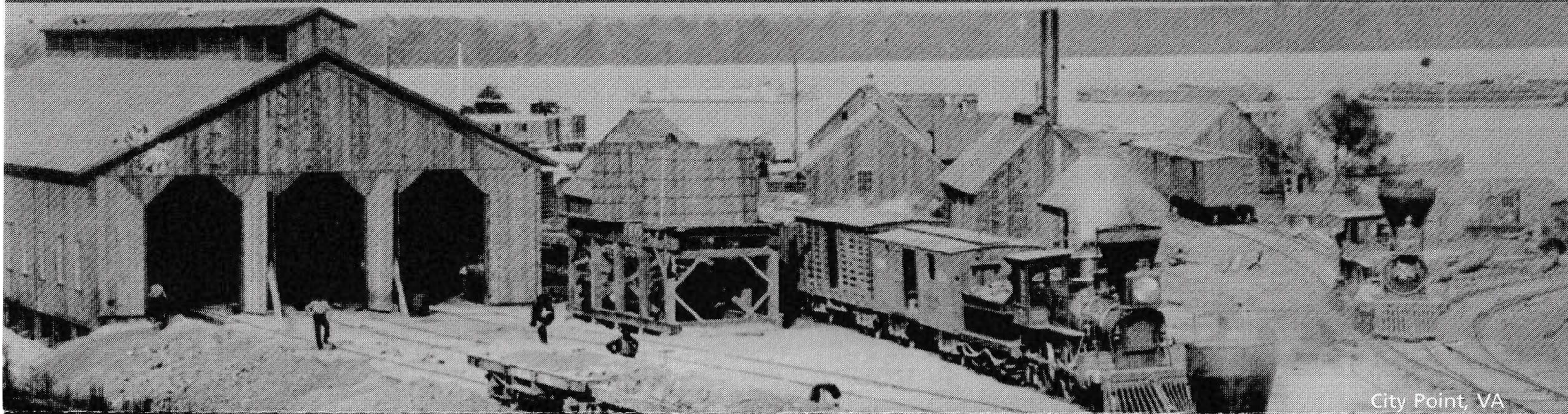


Railroads Under Siege

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Petersburg National Battlefield
1539 Hickory Hill Road
Petersburg, Virginia 23803



On the eve of the Civil War, Petersburg was the second-largest city in Virginia and the seventh-largest city in the south. With its proximity to the James River and its location along the Appomattox River, Petersburg was an ideal place to trade flour, cotton, and tobacco and the transportation hub for Richmond. By the time of the siege from June 1864 to April 1865, the freight of all but one railroad from the Deep South bound for the Confederate capital passed through Petersburg. [see map on back]

Of the five railroads that started from, passed through, or terminated in Petersburg, three: the Petersburg (& Weldon), the Richmond and Petersburg lines, and the South Side, were crucial to the success of Confederate General Robert E. Lee during the nine-month siege. Union General Ulysses S. Grant arrived in Petersburg in June of 1864 to sever these rail lines. As the siege progressed Grant made use of the dormant City Point section of the South Side rail line and had his own railroad built behind the lengthening Union siege lines to supply his forces.

Grant's ability to build railroads when necessary reveals a significant disparity between the Union and the Confederacy: the Union government was able to control its railroads, while the Confederacy, in keeping with its strict stance on states' rights, had its railroads controlled by private companies. To prevent being bought out, Southern railroad companies would use different gauges (the distance between the rails) and not allow their lines to link to other railroads. While it may have made perfect business sense, these practices proved detrimental to the Confederacy which was stuck using over 100 railroads with no central control.

By coming to Petersburg in June of 1864, Grant intended to cripple the Confederacy by destroying its precious tracks. With one efficient railroad the Union was able to do what the Confederacy could not do with three – transport people and goods when needed, and provide uninterrupted access to important places.

Petersburg (& Weldon) Railroad

1

This railroad began in the crucial port city of Wilmington, North Carolina and ended in Weldon, North Carolina. From there, the tracks to Petersburg were owned by the Petersburg Railroad Company. Confederate ships, and merchant ships from around the world, would unload in Wilmington and be carried by rail to Petersburg and beyond. Both sides were well aware that disruption of this critical line meant dire straits for Lee's army in Petersburg.

In August of 1864, Grant's forces severed the Petersburg (& Weldon) Railroad a few miles south of the city. Union troops ripped up the Weldon line as they moved five miles south to Reams' Station. To destroy tracks, the wooden railroad ties were stacked and burned, and the iron rails were placed at the top of the pile. Once the rails became hot

enough soldiers would bend them, often wrapping the hot iron around trees. This rendered the rails useless, and any future repairs would require new materials.

The destruction of part of the Petersburg (& Weldon) Railroad came at a time when there was no corn in Richmond or at the depots in and around Petersburg. Confederate soldiers relied on supplies from Wilmington for their food, so when Grant seized part of the line the reception of important rations was delayed. This forced Lee to unload supplies at Stony Creek Depot, 16 miles to the south, and carry them by covered wagon to Petersburg. The heavy delays this caused placed additional pressure on the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad and the South Side Railroad.



Richmond & Petersburg Railroad

2

He who controlled Richmond had Virginia at his disposal. Aside from being the capital city of the Confederate States of America, 1860s Richmond boasted important manufacturing facilities and enough railroad connections to access every corner of the Old Dominion.

In 1861, the Richmond and Petersburg (R&P) was one of four rail lines that terminated in but were not linked at all to each other in the Confederate capital. Any freight moving between these lines had to be unloaded from one, hauled through the streets

of the city and loaded on another one. A link was built between the R&P and a north bound line but it was not effective in moving troops and supplies. A similar gap problem in Petersburg was more readily fixed, and by the the end of 1861 the R&P moved cargo from the southern carriers more efficiently to the capital. During the siege the R&P's utility was hampered by it being a single track with limited sidings that only allowed for a brigade at a time to travel on it and by its southern reaches being within range of Union artillery.

South Side Railroad

3

The South Side Railroad connected Petersburg to the Confederate interior through its terminus in Lynchburg, Virginia. Freight coming up from the Shenandoah Valley and the Confederate interior arrived there via the Orange & Alexandria and Virginia & Tennessee Railroads respectively. At Burkeville Junction, Va., the South Side Railroad crossed the Richmond & Danville Railroad where supplies came from the Carolinas and further south.

As the siege wore on Confederate resources were stretched to defend this vital rail line. On April 2, 1865, the Federals finally broke through the

Confederate lines after their victory at Five Forks the day before. The South Side Railroad was the crux of the battle, with Lee telling Major General George E. Pickett to “hold at all hazards”. Even if the Union attack was unsuccessful at Five Forks Major General Philip H. Sheridan was told to destroy as much of the South Side Railroad as possible. The Union victory necessitated Lee’s immediate evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond. Seven days after the loss of this railroad, Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House.

Richmond & Danville Railroad

4

Though it did not include Petersburg in its journey, the Danville Railroad was an essential link between Richmond and the Confederate interior. Efficient from Richmond to Danville, problems began once the train reached the North Carolina border. In Danville, the Richmond & Danville Railroad’s ownership ended, and the Piedmont Railroad Company took over. But the Piedmont Railroad was not completed until 1863, and when it was finally ready the track was of a different gauge than the Richmond & Danville.

While the Danville line provided access to the interior, the crippling of the Petersburg (& Weldon) Railroad and the inept Richmond & Petersburg Railroad were much more important to Richmond. Food, clothing, and medicine would arrive in Wilmington, NC and eventually be brought to Richmond via the two railroads. The Danville Railroad could supply Richmond, but it took longer for goods from southwest Virginia to arrive. While important, these resources were incomparable to what could be delivered from an Atlantic port.

U.S. Military Railroad

5

After Grant arrived at City Point in June of 1864 he ordered the construction of a railroad behind the lines to supply his army. The United States Military Rail Road Construction Corps had grown accustomed to such orders from Grant, as they had turned miles of forsaken Confederate track into usable Union railroads. Due to a congressional act passed in January 1862 which created an agency to control captured Confederate railroads, Grant had significant latitude when it came to creating rail lines.

With its opening, moving supplies and troops to the front and the wounded back to the Depot Field Hospital was more rapid and frequent. It is one of the early examples in American military history of railroads being utilized to transport soldiers from a rear area to the battle front.

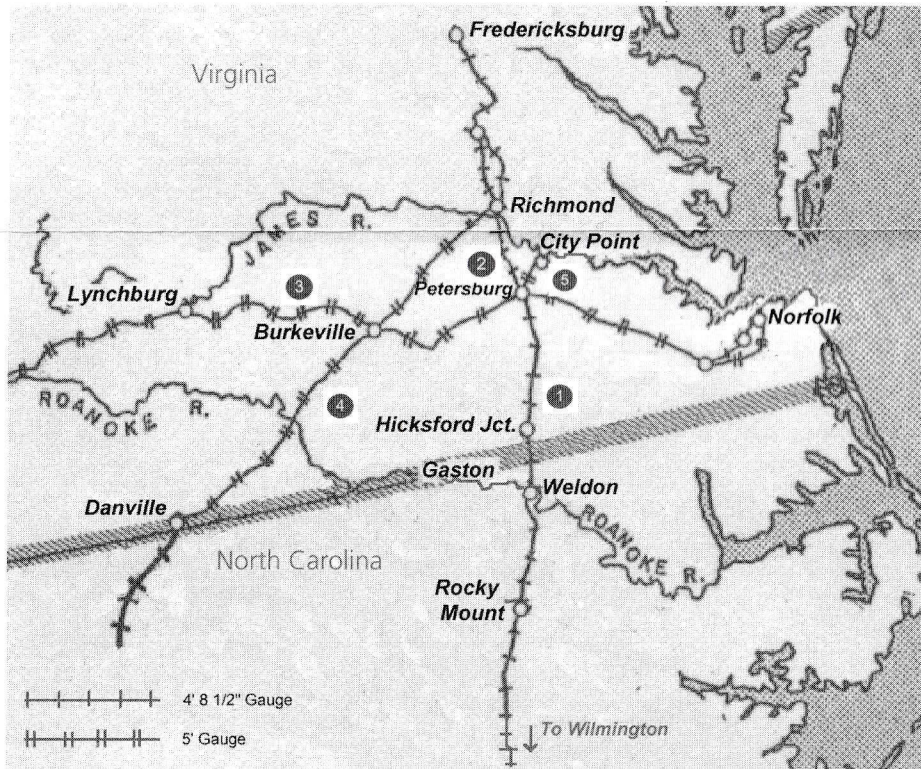
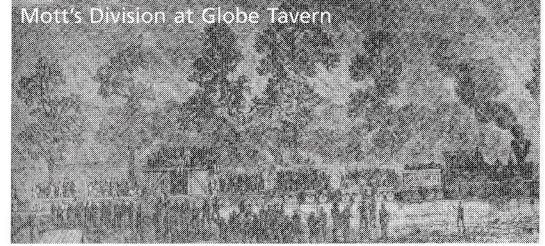
Fresh food, too, was now commonplace for Union soldiers. Fruits, vegetables, meats, coffee, tea, sugar, pepper and salt were just some of the many goods that were constantly being delivered from City Point. It has been said that bread cooked at

In the case of the U.S. Military Railroad (USMRR)

Grant used the existing tracks leading from City Point up to a mile behind the Union lines before Petersburg. The repairs to these tracks were completed and this line was operational by early July 1864. From there the USMRR branched off following behind the siege lines as they extended south and west around the city. Any supplies Grant needed to construct the railroad were ordered and shipped from Norfolk and Alexandria, Virginia. By the end of the siege the USMRR was 21 miles long with depot stations and field hospitals along the way.

City Point was still warm when it reached Union soldiers near the battle lines.

Mott's Division at Globe Tavern



From: *The Railroads of the Confederacy* by Robert C. Black III

In the nearly ten-month stalemate at Petersburg, one of the longest sieges of an American city, Grant had won the war of the railroads and, in doing so, forced Lee to surrender at Appomattox Court House. It has been suggested that the lack of proper food or clothing led to the Confederacy's demise, because this was the condition in which Lee surrendered his army. In response to this, notable Civil War author Bell Wiley wrote, "Rebel armies were in no sense famished because of failure of food production...everywhere in the south...[black] workers grew bountiful crops in every year of the war. Production, with the possible exception of meat, was always more than ample for both civilians and soldiers. The failure, then, was not one of production but of distribution."

The Confederacy's inability to master the use of the railroads at their disposal, combined with the Union's creative rail strategies, contributed to the fall of Lee's army at Petersburg and, in a broader scope, the entire Confederacy.