

From the ashes of a railroad yard fire, Union Bridge only grew – October 22, 2023

Shouts of “Fire!” must have echoed throughout the village of Union Bridge on the night of December 3, 1868, as flames began spreading from the oil house in the Western Maryland Railroad yard to other nearby buildings owned by the company.

Joshua Switzer described the event in his 1876 “Historical Sketch of Union Bridge, MD.” “The machine shop, carpenter shop, blacksmith shop, and all the other buildings and local improvements (except the engine house) of the Western Maryland Railroad Company, took fire and were burned. The fire originated in the oil house, and so rapid was the conflagration that the tools of the workmen, the books of the railroad company, and all the finished and unfinished work, including a new locomotive engine, in process of construction, therein were destroyed and lost. But by extraordinary labor and vigilance, all other contiguous buildings in the town were saved.”

Switzer continued, “This was the first experience of a loss by fire in the town and was severely felt by the railroad company, then in its infancy, and was also felt as a public local calamity by the inhabitants of the town and vicinity, the mutual character of which being manifested by the local and substantial pecuniary aid contributed [by the railroad’s presence].” Unfortunately, no photographs of the fire or its aftermath have been located.

Ten days after the fire, Westminster’s Democratic Advocate newspaper reported, “The machine and repair shops of the Western Maryland Railroad, in Union Bridge, were destroyed by fire on Thursday night last. The fire is supposed to have originated in the oil and supply house of the shops. The machinery was of an ordinary character, and of not much value. The houses, with the blacksmith shop, which were of frame, were totally destroyed. All the locomotives, together with the cars of the Company, were saved, and the trains were on regular time next morning. A large amount of the machinery that was in the building can be repaired at small cost. The loss to the company will be about \$10,000. Great credit is due to the citizens of the village and surrounding country for the promptness with which they repaired to the scene of the fire, and for the labor in assisting to stop the progress of the destroying element.” Little Pipe Creek ran nearby and possibly served as the source of water.

There is a difference between Switzer’s account and that of the newspaper. According to Paul W. Faulkner, President of the Western Maryland Railroad Historical Society, there were five locomotives in service on the tracks between Union Bridge and Baltimore at the time of the fire. Luckily, only one, the “Green Spring,” was in a shop building and suffered sufficient damage that it was “deemed unrepairable and scrapped in 1869.” The remaining four locomotives, including the “Monocacy,” pictured here, were somewhere else that night. The loss of the company’s books left posterity without valuable information from the railroad’s earliest years.

Before the arrival of the Western Maryland Railroad (WMRR) in May 1862, Union Bridge was one of Carroll’s smallest towns. Wagons hauled local agricultural products to nearby mills or to

Baltimore markets, but travel was slow. The few retail merchants in town were also dependent upon wagons to bring goods to stock their shelves. The railroad changed all of that.

Between 1862 and 1868, the town was the terminus of the WMRR which crossed Carroll County and connected it directly to Baltimore. A full array of buildings, tracks, and a turntable existed during those years, supplying residents of the Union Bridge area with jobs in the railroad shops where rail cars were built or repaired and possibly locomotives as well. Following the fire, “All of the said shops and other buildings were forthwith rebuilt in a better and more substantial manner than they had previously been.” Switzer praised the “inherent energy and enterprise of the railroad company” in the rebuilding effort. After all, the area was dependent upon the company for economic growth including homes built by railroad personnel from superintendents to others on the pay scale — carpenters, painters, brakemen, blacksmiths, and telegraph operators. In addition, boarding houses, stores, churches, and hotels sprang up on newly created streets.

After a six-year pause, the WMRR began laying track toward Detour, then known as Double Pipe Creek. Less than two weeks after the Union Bridge fire, the Democratic Advocate reported that a fierce December wind had toppled the company’s bridge at Double Pipe Creek Station. “The bridge was a *Howe truss*, built of wood, and had just been completed, except that it had not been entirely suspended. The structure was one hundred and fifty feet long and was about thirty feet above the bed of Pipe Creek over which it was thrown.” Fortunately for the WMRR, it was the contractor who had to absorb the \$4,000 loss “as the Company had not accepted the structure.”

In 1872 Carroll County carved the Union Bridge Election District out of the Uniontown, Middleburg, and New Windsor districts. It became District #12. With obvious pride, Joshua Switzer noted that 1872 was also the year Union Bridge was incorporated as a town. “And what had been prior to that time a ‘settlement,’ a ‘burg,’ and a ‘village,’ at once rose to the dignity of a town, clothed with municipal authority.” Streets which had no legal names finally received them. “The principal thoroughfare through the said town, being the Liberty and Pipe Creek turnpike road” became Main Street which is its name today.

For the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the WMRR continued as the town’s major employer. There were no more fires, but early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the railroad shops were moved to Hagerstown and workers who didn’t relocate there sometimes found employment at the Tidewater Cement Plant in town. But that is another story.

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*Image 1: 1877 Atlas of Carroll County, Maryland    Caption: The Western Maryland Railroad yard in Union Bridge as it appeared in 1877 at the north end of town.*

*Image 2: Courtesy of Western Maryland Railroad Historical Society      Caption: The Monocacy was one of five locomotives serving the Western Maryland Railroad in 1868 when the fire occurred but was not damaged.*

*Image 3: Courtesy of Western Maryland Railroad Historical Society      Caption: Patch of the Western Maryland Railroad Historical Society*