GREENVILLE'S FIRST STREET RAILWAY SYSTEM

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Seven years after Appomatox, the Charlotte and Atlanta Air Line Railway began operations. Due to the efforts of General William King Easley and the fact that Greenville County had issued bonds to help finance its building, approximately seventeen miles of its tracks ran through Greenville County. Yet the railroad barely touched the perimeter of the two and a half mile circle that was the "city limits" of the town of Greenville. In his *Greenville Century Book*, Col. S. S. Crittenden wrote (page 64): "The completion of the Richmond and Danville Air Line in the early seventies gave new courage to the hearts and minds of our people and made Greenville the best mart for trade in the upper part of the state." He states that the growth in population between 1870 and 1880 was greater in ratio than any other decade in its history.

By 1873, the Airline Railway had built freight and passenger depots at the end of what is now West Washington Street. The Greenville and Columbia Railroad had its depots on Augusta Street near the intersection with Vardry Street. There was no rail connection between the two railroads. At this time there were no paved streets and very few sections of paved sidewalks in Greenville. During wet weather, heavily loaded wagons would mire up almost to the axle. A normal load of two thousand pounds on a two-horse wagon in dry weather would have to be reduced during bad weather, sometimes to as little as five hundred pounds. Thomas Claghorn Gower,[1] grandfather of the writer, believed there was a wonderful opportunity in establishing a horse-drawn street railway connecting the freight and passenger depots on West Washington Street with the business area a mile and a quarter away, and also with the depot on Augusta Street. Permission was secured from the city for a horse-drawn street railway and the

[1]The Claghorn ancestor of the Gower family was captured by Oliver Cromwell's soldiers in Scotland and sent to New England as an indentured servant. He was lucky at that for some of Cromwell's soldiers went into battle singing hymns and then cut their enemies' heads off.

tracks were laid in 1873.[2] The line of the street railway ran from the end of West Washington Street to Main Street, on South Main Street across a wooden bridge over the Reedy River, and out Augusta Street to the Greenville and Columbia Depot.

According to family tradition, there were two passenger cars, three flat cars for freight and a "Tallaho" for special occasions. A storage warehouse, two stories and basement, was built at the southeast corner of West Washington and Laurens Streets. A cotton storage platform was built on the opposite corner of Laurens Street, and to the rear of this, a brick stable was built with an Assembly Hall on the second floor. This was on Laurens Street where the Greyhound Bus Station is now located. After the old Opera House on the corner of Coffee and Main Streets was condemned, "Gower's Hall" was used for a few years by travelling dramatic companies. Ten, twenty and thirty cent stock companies presented such plays as "Ten Nights in a Bar Room," "Damon and Pythias," "East Lynn," and others.

After the Car Line and the storage warehouse were completed, a service to deliver freight shipments to the merchants was offered. The shipments were transferred from the railroads to the warehouse on the flat cars and then distributed to the merchants. Delivery charges of five cents for small boxes and ten cents for large boxes were added to the freight bill and collected after the shipments were delivered to the merchants. One of the Negroes who delivered the shipments could not read or write, but he had memorized the names of the merchants and recognized them. Practically all of the shipments came in white pine boxes and some of them were carefully opened with a nail puller and reused. Others were used for furniture by Negroes. They also made good kindling and wonderful "whittling stock." Nearly all of the manufactured goods came from New England in those days.[3]

An interesting relationship grew up between the personnel connected with the steam railroads and the horse-drawn Street

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[2]This date is established from a clipping in the author's possession and references in the notes of his father, Arthur Gailliard Gower. The formal franchise may not have been given until a year or so later. Col. Crittenden in *The Greenville Century Book* gives the date of construction as the early seventies.

[3]Henry Grady, who lived in Atlanta and was a gifted public speaker, stated that the South should produce more of our needs and said that everything from the rattle that a baby first heard to the shroud that it was finally buried in came from New England.

Railway System. When the railroad company moved its terminal from Central (located about thirty miles south of Greenville) to this city in the early eighteen nineties, it significantly affected the development of the section around the depot, that is West Washington Street, Mulberry Street, and Hampton Avenue. A round house, machine shop, and turn table were established and train crews including engineers, firemen, brakemen, flagmen, wrecking crews, dispatchers, and their families settled in the vicinity of the depot. They were dependent upon the horse-drawn Street Railway System for local transportation and were loyal patrons of its services.

After 1881, when the Richmond and Danville Railroad purchased both lines, the tracks of the Airline Railroad and the Greenville and Columbia were connected and the West Washington Street station became the principal freight terminal for Greenville. In 1891 the wooden bridge across the Reedy River was replaced by a light steel bridge, and it was decided to abandon the street car line from Main and Washington Streets to the Greenville and Columbia Depot.

In October, 1894, Thomas Claghorn Gower was drowned in French Broad River and ownership of the Street Railway System was acquired by Arthur Gailliard Gower, father of the writer. He leased the Washington Street Warehouse to the Southern Railway (which had reorganized the Richmond and Danville) and entered into a contract to haul freight between the warehouse and the depot. The leased warehouse was used as a downtown freight depot until the Southern Railway built the present depot on River Street in 1897. With no freight to haul, the horsedrawn Street Railway System had completed its service. It was dismantled and the rails sold.

My memory covers the period from 1891 to 1897 during which the Street Car System was being operated and I would like to briefly describe the Main Street business section that began at the Reedy River bridge and ended at North Street. There were some residences below Broad Street and there were no stores north of North Street. In 1901 there were fourteen residences between North and College streets and W. C. Cleveland, uncle of the Bill Cleveland that we knew, lived where the Kress Building is now located at the corner of Main and McBee Streets. A *City Directory* published in 1901 lists a White Boarding House across from Mahon and Arnold. I recall that in 1903, it was called, perhaps charitably,

a Negro Boarding House. There were twelve Negroes in business on Main Street, north of the Bridge. Some of those mentioned are:

Dock Austin: Barber
L. M. Rive: Barber
Rector and Moultrie: Grocers
M. Wiggins: Restaurant
L. M. White: Shoemaker
Brier and Tolbert: Grocers
J. C. Thompson: Butcher
B. D. Goldsmith: Grocer
Goldsmith and Dyson: Grocers
Burgess and Simpson: Barbers
Samuel Williams: Shoemaker
Samuel Montgomery: Restaurant

Before the State Dispensary System was set up there were numerous saloons just off Main Street. Intoxicated men staggering on the streets was a common sight. Practically all business in Greenville at this time was locally owned. Woolworth Company opened in Greenville about 1904. The period during which the horse-drawn Street Railway System was operated was definitely the "Pre-Hot Dog" Era. "Hot Dogs" were introduced to Greenville by Charlie Spencer about 1903 or 1904. He stood at the corner of Main and Washington Streets, or in the street and announced in a voice that could be heard for several blocks that you could "Get 'm while they're hot." He dispensed them from a kerosene-heated box. It was also the "Pre-Sandwich" Era. Biscuits and corn bread were the prevailing breads. Applying the rule that the area of a circle varies as the square of the diameter, country biscuits were more than four times the size of town biscuits. It was also the "Pre-Safety Razor" Era. Some men could not shave themselves and depended on the barber. A number of barber shops opened up for two hours on Sunday. The prevailing wage scale for Negro men in 1895 who worked for the Railway Company was $4.00 per week. Cooks were paid $1.25 or $1.50 per week. When the first units of Poe Mill, American Spinning Company and Mills Mill were built in 1895 laborers were paid 60¢ per day.

In 1885 the first electric street railway system was started in operation in Baltimore, Maryland. The successful application of

electric motive power to railway cars did not come overnight. It had a background of hard work and disappointments. Success was finally achieved in Richmond, Virginia, after test after test had failed and the car had to be pulled back to the barn with mule power. With the success of the Baltimore system, there was a rapid expansion of the electric street railways. Horse-car lines were obsolete overnight. Due to the cost of conversion, however, horse-drawn lines in small cities were handicapped and changes were slow. Both my Father and Grandfather considered changing to electricity-driven cars but found the cost to be prohibitive, the traffic not sufficient to produce profitable income, and the rails were too light for the heavier cars.

In 1898, after the dismantling of the horse car tracks, the City of Greenville granted to George M. Bunting and Associates of Philadelphia two franchises, one for an electric street railway system and one for a gas, electric light, and power company. Bunting also represented The American Pipe Company which owned and operated the Paris Mountain Water Company which had been incorporated in 1891. The interests of Rueben R. Asbury and his son, Abner D. Asbury, who at that time operated the Gas and Electric Company, were purchased. Three corporations were established: The Greenville Traction Company; The Greenville Gas, Electric Light and Power Company, and the Paris Mountain Water Company. Within the next two years tracks were laid from the Southern Depot to the city limits on Pendleton Street and within a block of the limits on Augusta Street. Other tracks were laid from Main and Washington Streets to Poe Mill via Main Street, College Street, and Buncombe Street. Tracks were laid also on North Street, crossed through Manly Street (or thereabouts) to McBee Avenue and then back to Main and Washington. Cars returned from Poe Mill via North Street. About 1904 the "Belt Line" was built. The tracks at the end of Pendleton Street were connected via Woodside Mill, Monaghan Mill, and American Spinning Company to the track that ended at Poe Mill. Later a spur was built to the Sans Souci Country Club.

This rambling account cannot close without mention of the locally-famous "Lightning." The Street Railway was known as a horse-car line but in reality it was a mule-car line. One of the small mules that pulled the passenger cars was named "Lightning" because he could kick as quick as lightning. He could be used

to pull the cars because practically no harness was needed—no breeching, no holding back straps and no crupper. Not many people would have had the courage to attempt to put the crupper under Lightning's tail.

The most important and colorful character associated with the horse-drawn street cars was its stocky Negro driver, Billy Fronaberger. Holding the reins of capricious Lightning loosely in his lap, he was free to slow down and pick up patrons arriving late at the corner, free to wave to all the children along the route, free to exchange his views about the weather, free, also, to transmit local happenings of interest down Washington and Main Streets from whence the news would be carried to adjacent streets by the listening passengers.

Life was then geared to a leisurely pace which suited perfectly the philosophy of the friendly driver . . . and the ambition of Lightning. One wonders if in substituting speed for deliberateness, impersonal relations for friendly interest, and the jet plane for the mule-drawn car, we have really gained in the exchange. Billy Fronaberger would not think so.