

Maryland Colonial Society

Essay Contest

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Grade 11

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The B&O was both a driving force in economic development and an integral part of early American railroading development. More specifically, the Baltimore and Ohio was an important part of Maryland's economy and *was* early Maryland railroading. The B&O served several important roles for Baltimore referred to by George Douglas in, All Aboard! The Railroad In American Life, (p. 21) as, "The Mother of Railroads."¹

Founded in 1827, the B&O would be the major competition for the C&O (Chesapeake and Ohio canal) in terms of a means of transportation of both freight and passengers.² Early trains were better suited for carrying passengers due to their relatively flimsy construction and small size. The barges that frequented canals on the other hand were much better suited to carry large heavy loads of freight.³ Despite this, some were still concerned with preventing the canal from taking over all traffic. Twenty-five such men founded the B&O in 1827 for just that purpose. On July 4, 1828 the first stone was laid in a grand ceremony attended by the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, Charles Carroll.⁴

As time progressed the railroad continued to expand, at one point reaching roughly \$10 million in annual revenue. Unfortunately, after the Civil War, the precipitant

¹ Douglas, George H, All Aboard! The Railroad in American Life, (New York: Paragon House, 1993) 21.

² Jacobs, Timothy, ed. The History of the Baltimore & Ohio: America's First Railroad. (Greenwich: Brompton Books Corp, 1989) 12-13; James D, The Great Road: The Building of the Baltimore & Ohio, the Nations First Railroad, 1828-1855, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 140.

³ Douglas 33

⁴ Jacobs 14

of the monumental revenue, the B&O was left, physically, in tatters.⁵ As with most of the country it began to decline in revenue and was left with a great deal of repairing, upgrading, rebuilding, and improving of its facilities required. To meet this new need projects were started in droves. One such project was the double tracking of the main stem. This and other changes and improvements were lead by John W. Garrett, president of B&O.⁶ Garrett also increased control of the Marietta & Cincinnati Railroad in order to improve the link between the B&O and St Louis. The B&O also strengthened its weakest areas with repairs in order to keep the track running as efficiently as possible. Along with improvements geared towards improving already existing parts of the B&O, new areas were expanded into. One such expansion was the creation of the B&O Marine Terminal; this new addition allowed trains to come right down to the water to have their cargo loaded onto boats.⁷ The goal was to remove any middle men handling the trains' cargo on its way to boats.

In addition to changes affecting the railroad specifically, more general improvements were made. An excess of 60 railroads, including the B&O, met on the 18th of November 1883 to deal with the problem of scheduling train arrival and departure times from stations. This issue arose from each station going by the local time, thus making a train's arrival time an illusive and ever changing thing. To combat this issue, the congregation of railroads decided to create general time zones that would be used as the standard for dealing with arrival and departure times at railroad stations. There were to be 5 zones one hour apart. This system was quickly adopted by large portions of the U.S. outside of the railroads, and later was adopted as the general official standard in

⁵ Jacobs 55

⁶ Jacobs 58-60

⁷ Jacobs 60

1918.⁸ Other areas of expansion were more concrete and rudimentary, such as actual creation of new tracks to different areas. The B&O built a track to Philadelphia which it ran its trains on because a Pennsylvania company which owned tracks already going there was prohibiting the B&O, competition for the Pennsylvania Company, from using them. B&O trains were running on these newly constructed tracks by 1886.⁹ The B&O continued developing and expanding for well over 100 years total until being absorbed by a more modern company. However, the Baltimore and Ohio's existence was not always an easy one and its development was forged through many difficulties and obstacles along the way.

After the Civil War the B&O was in a sorry state physically. Damage to the tracks and bridges was severe and widespread, in need of improvements, repairs, rebuilding, upgrading, and modernizing.¹⁰ Revenue declines also accompanied the heavily damaged tracks. Despite this the B&O did pull through after setting about repairs with a passion. Later, in the depression of 1877 the B&O, along with many other railroad companies, suffered from a violent and wide spread railroad strike triggered by payroll cuts and new work practices.¹¹ A decade of cutthroat competition between railroad companies followed. Despite these and other setbacks, railroads continued to develop and bring with that development a plethora of economic benefits.

The B&O like most other railroads served as an economic stimulant in more ways than one. By shortening the time needed to travel from one city to another, railroads

⁸ Jacobs 63

⁹ Jacobs 63-64

¹⁰ Jacobs 55

¹¹ Jacobs 63

made the U.S. smaller and allowed for more intercity relations.¹² Further, railroads allowed for timely transport of goods from one place to another, bringing in trade goods from the western United States to port cities such as Baltimore. Indeed, the B&O was founded to enable Baltimore to remain competitive against Philadelphia and New York in terms of western trade.¹³ Not only did the railroads such as the B&O allow for transporting of goods, it also generated a need for them. Iron and coal and a host of other raw materials were in high demand due to the railroads (Daniels xv). Moreover, railroads were used as passenger trains as well, this further added to the economy. Items usually reserved for households such as beds, cabinets, sinks, and more were now also used in railroads in passenger cars, most commonly Pullmans. The operation of trains required men, and that meant jobs were created, everything from conducting to managing the ticket booth require someone to run it. Specialized equipment was required for repairing some parts of trains, and food was needed to serve passengers as well. Further still, engineers were required to build bridges and tunnels for trains, not to mention the workmen needed to perform the physical labor. Perhaps most importantly, railroads such as the B&O generated a need for innovation and invention. The creation of the air break, Pullman cars for passengers, improved engines, and even Bisquick which was created by a railroad chef were all innovations that may never have come about were it not for railroads such as the B&O.¹⁴ Were it not for the B&O, what many consider to be the prototype for all American trains, much of these benefits would never have come to pass.

¹² Gordon, Sarah H, Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1929-1929 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997) 268

¹³ Gordon 16

¹⁴ Daniels, Rudolph, Trains Across the Continent: North American Railroad History. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) xvi

The B&O was considered by many to be the prototype for all American trains, and without it the industry would likely have developed, if it developed at all, in a starkly different way.¹⁵ Canals may have been adopted as the best means of transportation only to be abandoned when their impracticality came to light, leaving the country without any efficient means of long distance travel or transport. The economic benefits reaped from the development of trains would not have been achieved either. In all likelihood, trains would eventually have become the main means of long distance travel sooner or later, but one must wonder what may have happened in the time when they did not exist that could have sent the country into severe troubles. Thankfully no such dire troubles developed that could not be overcome, thanks in part to the B&O.

¹⁵ Dilts, James D, The Great Road: The Building of the Baltimore & Ohio, the Nations First Railroad, 1828-1855, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 2-3

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