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RAILROADS AND URBAN RIVALRIES
IN ANTEBELLUM EASTERN VIRGINIA

by Peter C. Stewart *

The recent controversy between Richmond and Norfolk over deepening the James indicates that urban rivalry in the state of Virginia is far from dead. Such contests with roots extending far into Virginia's past reached a peak in the three decades before the Civil War. Every major community in the Old Dominion took part, but the most serious rivalry involved a three-cornered struggle among Richmond, Norfolk, and Petersburg.

At the outset of the railroad era, eastern Virginia's chief commercial centers in population, resources, and wealth were Richmond, Norfolk (including neighboring Portsmouth), and Petersburg in that order. The state capital had edged ahead of the other two communities in the decade preceding the War of 1812. The war actually helped Richmond's growth and by 1820 its inhabitants numbered over 12,000. Ten years later the population had increased by twenty-five percent and the city on the James endowed with several flour mills, iron foundries, and tobacco manufactories enhanced its lead. The upper James River and its canal brought the produce of the interior to her wharves, while coastwise and ocean-going ships, although with difficulty, ascended the lower James to bear away Richmond's commerce. Norfolk on the Elizabeth River near the entrance to Chesapeake Bay lacked the resources necessary for manufacturing but did possess one of the finest harbors in the world. The onetime leading commercial town of the state stagnated particularly during the second war with Great Britain and the depressing twenties. Petersburg, located on the shallow Appomattox River, obviously did not have the advantage of a commodious harbor, but

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the town did contain a number of cotton textile mills, a few flour mills, and several tobacco concerns. Industrial development, on the whole, however, lagged behind that enjoyed in Richmond. Petersburg’s inhabitants made up for their poor location by making maximum use of their resources. Thus her residents proved more than a match for Norfolk in the fight for second place in economic development.

These three communities all participated in building the first major railroads in the state. Each railroad when projected was expected to promote the economic growth of its sponsoring community or at least to defend it against the incursions of another. Such objectives were bound to produce intense rivalry.

The most bitter of these “wars” pitted the port of Norfolk against the manufacturing center of Petersburg. Toward the end of the War of 1812 Norfolk merchants and North Carolina farmers happily witnessed the completion of the Dismal Swamp Canal, which permitted lighters and other small craft to bring the Old North State’s lumber and agricultural products to the Elizabeth River. Narrow and shallow, the canal posed no threat to Petersburg, recently rebuilt after a disastrous fire and entering an era of significant growth as a textile and tobacco-processing center. Unfortunately for relations between the two towns, the businessmen of Norfolk, noting that they controlled only a small fraction of the total commerce of their own state, tried to secure the tobacco and grain produced in considerable volume in the Roanoke Valley. This was possible because the Roanoke River flows into Albemarle Sound, the southern terminus of the Dismal Swamp Canal. Tobacco and grain from Southside Virginia, as well as cotton from North Carolina, could, therefore, be carried by water all the way to Norfolk. In December 1815 several men in an open boat carried a barrel of mountain flour from Campbell County in Southside Virginia to Norfolk. This act gave “pleasing evidence of the facilities which exist towards opening a communication with the interior of the state through the fertile parts of North Carolina.”¹ However, several rapids in the Roanoke River had to be eliminated if Norfolk was to secure a steady flow of goods from the interior. Shortly after the voyage of the men from Campbell, Norfolk merchants helped organize the Roanoke Navigation Company, which gradually cleared the river for trade. Aware that the volume of commerce was bound to increase and that Roanoke River towns would be employing larger vessels, the officers of the Dismal Swamp Canal Company

¹ Norfolk American Beacon, December 14, 1815.
immediately made plans to rebuild their waterway. By 1830 both projects had been completed. Norfolk, it appeared, had obtained commercial supremacy in the Roanoke Valley.

The farmers in the Valley did not feel endangered by this development at all for the appearance of the canal was to their advantage. One Valley newspaper, the Roanoke Advocate, suggested in 1830 that planters in the upper Valley stop wagoning their tobacco to Petersburg and send their cargoes to Norfolk. The editor pointed out that farmers formerly took all winter to ship their crops, but this was no longer necessary. The editor suggested that Valley folk could expect even further improvements, for Petersburg would awake quickly “from her dreams of security. . . . Norfolk and Petersburg will then be fairly in competition, and our friends may find good and ready markets, and take their choice.”

Petersburg residents had no intention of allowing Norfolk to take the commerce of the Roanoke Valley. It had long been “customary to view the upper towns as the jealous rivals of Norfolk and enemies of her prosperity,” and the attempted capture of the Roanoke commerce brought quick retaliation. In 1830 the General Assembly over the objection of Norfolk’s delegation chartered the Petersburg Railroad Company. Within three years the railroad south of Petersburg reached the Roanoke River at Weldon, North Carolina.

With the trade of the upper Roanoke about to shift back to Petersburg, the residents of Norfolk decided to build their own railroad. Some Norfolk merchants promoted the Tarborough Railroad, designed to connect the Tar and Roanoke Rivers, thereby increasing trade, particularly along the latter river. The Tarborough project, however, failed to obtain sufficient subscriptions. Most investors purchased stock in the Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad Company which planned to reach Weldon, North Carolina. The road, claimed Thomas G. Broughton, Jr., the editor of the Herald, “would bid defiance to competition and insure us command of the entire produce of the upper Roanoke.” Despite the importance of the project, stock sales were slow. Norfolk sought a variance in the usual method of distributing aid whereby the state bought forty percent of the shares only after private interests pledged the other sixty percent. The Senate refused to allow any change in the procedure, which led the editor to comment that the Richmond and Petersburg interests proved too strong for Norfolk:

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*Norfolk Herald, September 13, 1830.
*Ibid., June 27, 1829.
*Ibid., April 30, 1832.

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We did flatter ourselves with the hope that the bill would pass, for we were anxious to have to say that Norfolk was indebted to the Legislature for one . . . even one act of liberality and justice, but we have been disappointed . . . but you cannot prevent it—completed it will be, in spite of you—a revolution has taken place in the minds of the people of this district in favor of the railroad, and revolutions never go backward.

The Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad faced nearly insurmountable obstacles. Begun in 1832 in the midst of a cholera epidemic, it was completed in 1837 in a time of nationwide financial panic. The depression which followed kept receipts from transportation quite low. Although the route to Weldon was properly surveyed, shoddy construction resulted in high maintenance costs. Still, the venture might have survived except for a direct confrontation with the Petersburg Railroad.

Financial statements of the two companies indicated that the Petersburg firm was far better equipped to withstand a prolonged fight. In spite of its shorter length, the interior road collected much more in tolls. Completed about three years before the Portsmouth road, it had been able to establish a firm foundation before the rivalry commenced. Still, the other road conceivably could catch up. After the first full year of business the Portsmouth railroad trailed its opponent by only $25,000 in receipts. For the remainder of the decade the seaboard line did well, increasing its receipts from nearly $49,800 to $59,140 in 1839 and finally to almost $73,000 a year later. Petersburg, however, did even better. Figures for 1840 are unavailable but in 1839 the piedmont road earned about $130,800, well over twice the receipts of her rival. Up to this point competition had not injured either party and the future looked bright for both despite the prevailing depression.

One significant factor giving Petersburg a long range advantage was her ability to control freight traffic. The originators of the Portsmouth road had hoped to divert the flow of tobacco and other crops to the coast. This goal could never be fully realized, partially because Petersburg herself consumed an increasing quantity of produce in her mills and also because Richmond used even more. As Henry Bird, president of the Petersburg line, viewed the situation it was "very evident that the Portsmouth Company cannot be benefitted by the competition—nor indeed the towns of Norfolk and Portsmouth for the tobacco is to go to Richmond." Bird's opinion

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6 Norfolk Herald, March 1, 1833.
6a "Tolls Received," Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad Company, "Statements," Petersburg Railroad Company, Board of Public Works, MSS., Virginia State Archives, Richmond, hereafter cited as BPW.
7 Letter, Bird to J. Brown, June 18, 1842, Petersburg Railroad Company, BPW.
is borne out by the fact his railroad, unlike most roads at that time, derived income largely from freight—as high as sixty-five percent of all revenue in 1838, compared with less than thirty percent for the opposition. Bird cemented control over freight in the late 1830s by constructing a branch line westward which tapped the commerce of the Roanoke before it reached Weldon. Survival of the Portsmouth railroad in the depression-ridden 1840s, therefore, depended on persuading more travelers to use their facility.

Portsmouth officials realized that bridging the Roanoke River at Weldon would give their railroad an edge on the Petersburg line. The management of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, chartered just three years before in North Carolina, preferred not to cross the Roanoke to connect with another railroad. When the Weldon Bridge was completed, the seaboard merchants appeared to have outmaneuvered their rivals. Bird complained bitterly and tried, with the help of the Virginia Board of Public Works, to rent use of the bridge. Negotiations failed. The Petersburg Company then formed an alliance with two other Virginia railroads—the Richmond and Petersburg and the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac. The three companies, commonly called the “inland” route, cut fares in half, hoping to drive the Portsmouth Road out of business. The latter retaliated, reducing fares and arranging for special through rates to Baltimore with the newly created Baltimore and Norfolk Steam Packet Company (the Bay Line).

The rate war inflicted severe damage on the Petersburg Road. Bird complained to the state auditor in September 1842 that he could pay no dividend to the state on its share of the stock because of the severity of the competition. I must inform you that the efforts of the Portsmouth Company to divert our trade from us continue as active as ever. We no sooner lowered our rates of transportation last summer than they reduced theirs below ours, and it is probable we shall have to lower again.

The special through ticket also tended to reduce revenue for the Petersburg line. Bird estimated that the special arrangement gave his company $1.37 less per passenger than the local rate and meant that he suffered an annual loss of between $12,000 and $15,000.

Although the rate war cut income for the inland road, the reduction was even more severe for her rival. The seaboard line managed to hold her own fairly well until the through ticket took effect in December 1842. Revenue

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8 “Tolls Received,” and “Statements” of the respective companies, BPW.
9 Letter, Bird to Brown, September 16, 1842, Petersburg Railroad Company, BPW.
10 Petersburg Intelligencer, March 16, 1845.
then slid approximately twenty-five percent as the piedmont road steadily
gained the upper hand. The cost of construction of the bridge at Weldon
also severely jeopardized the Portsmouth Company's finances leaving the
company heavily in debt to some unsympathetic individuals. In 1843
Francis Rives, secretly representing the Petersburg Company, acquired one
of these claims and immediately acted to close the road. Petersburg officials
even sent some of their workers to help tear up the Portsmouth tracks. Upon
learning of these events, Walter Gwynn, president of the Portsmouth con-
cern, led another force to stop further assaults and repair the damage already
done. Following a comic chase scene and a bloodless encounter, the sheriff
of Northampton County, North Carolina, arrested Rives. Petersburg offi-
cials, of course, were annoyed, but saw eventual victory. The Petersburg
Intelligencer on March 16 predicted

that, as our state is a part owner in this concern, she will have too much regard for her
credit to remain much longer in a concern which will neither pay its debts, or sur-
render property for the payment of them, when she sees her liabilities are increasing.
We hesitate not to say that there is a moral obligation on the State either to have
business suspended or property sold.

The editor of the Herald responded that the comments from the Intelligencer were

well calculated to make false impressions. . . . The piece is marked by the same
cunning and concealment which have heretofore characterized the course of certain
individuals and corporations towards the Portsmouth Road. The article in the Intelligencer is but another small link in the chain of circumstances which goes to establish
the fact.11

The whole Rives business was "openly denounced as a gunpowder plot."12
Despite the seriousness of the situation, the editorial ended on a rather defi-
ant note. "In the meantime the Portsmouth Road will continue its opera-
tion."13 Anxiously awaiting news of Rives' trial in North Carolina, the
Herald prematurely reported that decisions in the lower courts against Rives
had been affirmed by the supreme court of the state, thwarting the "dia-
bolical efforts of the Petersburg Company to break down its hated rival."14
One can scarcely imagine the consternation in Hampton Roads when the
residents discovered that the North Carolina Supreme Court actually gave

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11 Norfolk Herald, March 19, 1845.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., March 22, 1845.
Rives control in the Old North State. Rives quickly moved to stop all traffic on the North Carolina portion of the Portsmouth Road.

Prominent Norfolkins tried to persuade the Virginia Board of Public Works to do something to save the road. Walter Gwynn hoped the Board of Public Works would assist against Rives. The state, he noted, helped build the road and he professed disbelief that "she can now be influenced to destroy it by the cold and selfish principle of dividend paying." One Norfolk businessman, writing a few months after the Rives affair, argued:

If Virginia gives up her Norfolk Railroad, . . . she relinquished to Baltimore her only seaport and all her foreign commerce hereafter. Like North Carolina she will become content, or will perforce be compelled, to become tributary to other states whilst by fostering her seaport she would remain independent of all other markets for her foreign and domestic imports and exports. 

Despite such pleading, the Board of Public Works and the General Assembly, though sympathetic, remained aloof.

In at least one respect the state legislature of North Carolina was friendlier. When Francis Rives petitioned that body for a charter to incorporate a line from Weldon to Virginia, the North Carolinians noted that Rives had an agreement with Petersburg by which he received payment to keep the line inactive. Obviously Rives was interested in obtaining a charter to prevent anyone else from starting another road to Portsmouth. A Virginia legislative committee hearing brought out the fact that Rives was to receive $2,500 quarterly as long as his road carried no person or produce. Several years later a new company rebuilt the railway and once again the seaboard enjoyed decent transportation with the Roanoke. Ironically one of the factors in the reappearance of this road was another urban rivalry—this one involving Richmond and Petersburg.

The contest between these two fall-line towns though less motivated by community pride was at times as vicious as the one between Norfolk and Petersburg. The animosity reached a peak in 1846 after the Portsmouth road had apparently been interred. As early as April internal improvement

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15 Twelfth Annual Report . . . of the Portsmouth and Roanoke Company (Portsmouth, 1844), p. 43.
16 George Blow to BPW, June 1, 1846, Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad Company, BPW.
17 "Record of Proceedings and Evidence Taken and Had before the Joint Committee Charged with the Investigation of the Conduct of Certain Railroad Companies, &c.," Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia, Session 1846-47 (Richmond, 1846), pp. 89-92; North Carolina, Legislative Documents (1846-47), pp. 4-5.
advocates suggested the construction of a ship channel from Petersburg to the Appomattox River near the James.\(^8\)

We have manufactures here which can and, if we only had the commercial advantages, would compete with those of any city in the Union. We have a real extensive and magnificent back country ready to pour into our laps the abundant treasures of its labor and its thrift, if we but afford the opportunity of the return, of a recompensing gain. Give us but the nucleus here—the means of an untrammeled and frequent intercourse with the high seas and we can force the hidden treasures of unnumbered acres and the "freighted tides" of distant waters to minister to our wealth and strength.\(^19\)

Petersburg, one editor advised, should not be angry with Richmond but should emulate her.

Richmond proposes to the country, not the country to Richmond. There is a public spirit, an enterprise, a strengthening and a laudable desire for gain there. Argus-eyed, active and ever prompt to make the very best of any and all projects to multiply the wealth and resources of the city. So it should be with Petersburg and so it will be if we are not mistaken.\(^20\)

In spite of these efforts to keep local jealousy at a minimum, anti-Richmond sentiment began to creep into the canal campaign. One correspondent noted that the real idea behind the project had become "to turn back the trade that has found its way to Richmond or take away that which time immemorially she had enjoyed."\(^21\) Petersburg, he submitted, wished to kill Richmond's ports on the James—Port Walthall and Bermuda Hundred—and capture the valley trade as well as the southern traffic. The truth was that many residents of the Cockade City, distressed by Richmond's growth, were concerned over talk of a railroad connecting the capital with Danville, and were irritated that much of the commerce coming over their railroad ended up in Richmond. After a vigorously supported beginning, the idea of a ship canal fell by the wayside and Petersburghers refocused attention on their railroads.

The "inner route" alliance had been uneasy at best. Even before it had been arranged, Bird complained about being caught between "the Portsmouth Company on the one hand and those who ought to be our friends (the Richmond and Fredericksburg Company) on the other." He bragged that once he paid for some iron to rebuild his facility he could "face them

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\(^8\) Petersburg Republican, April 13, 1846.
\(^9\) Ibid., July 10, 1846.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid., July 17, 1846.
both.” 22 When the Portsmouth road closed a few years later, Bird quickly terminated his arrangement with the other two lines. He then made a deal with James River steamboat interests to take passengers to Hampton Roads, there to board Bay steamers going to Baltimore. At the same time Petersburg started to revamp the publicly owned City Point Railroad so that passengers would have quick passage to the James River.

Moncure and Wirt Robinson, presidents of the other two lines, responded by building a branch line from the tracks of the Richmond and Petersburg to Port Walthall located just north of City Point on the James. The two “upper” route railways then organized a steamboat company known as the Norfolk and Port Walthall Association. According to testimony later given before a special legislative committee, the railroads not only gave the steamboats a certain amount of money based on the passenger traffic on the railroads, but even helped in financing the construction of the steamboats themselves though the company charters forbade stock purchases in other corporations. Both presidents defended their actions on the grounds that it was “an important protection to the companies north of Petersburg against the injury with which they have been threatened.” 23 The editor of the Petersburg Intelligencer, J. W. Syme, was not particularly receptive to the attempt to make Port Walthall a major riverport.

The proprietors of this famous new line which is to connect the “hole” where “cats” “most do congregate”—but which is now sonorously called “Port Walthall”—with the City of Norfolk, state in the outset that their object is “to expedite travel as much as possible between Petersburg and Richmond and Norfolk,” and therefore they will not stop for way travel. Why, what a benevolent and disinterested concern this new one is! They don’t care to make money! Not they. As a member of the legislature once said, they are “above the filthy lucre of the gain.” They would not pollute their pure hands with the “dirty dross.” They go entirely for the good of the public, and their association should be called “The Cat Hole Pro Bono Publico Steamboat Line.” 24

Syme correctly pointed out that the northern roads were perfectly willing to lose money on the Port Walthall proposition as long as the Petersburg people could be driven from the James River. Noting that Moncure Robinson was well known as the originator of “the new way of bringing business to his road by drawing business from it,” the Petersburg editor foresaw

22 Letter, Bird to J. Brown, September 10, 1842, Petersburg Railroad Company, BPW.
24 Editorial, Petersburg Intelligencer, April 11, 1846, as quoted in “Record of Proceedings and Evidence Taken and Had before the Joint Committee Charged with the Investigation of the Conduct of Certain Railroad Companies,” Journal of House of Delegates (1846), p. 38.
defeat for the scheme. "He can as easily dam up the river as prevent boats from running on it," Syme declared.

Stubbornness and personal dislike governed the actions of both Bird and Robinson. In private Robinson called Bird "one of those stupid fellows" and the latter complained about Robinson's "bullying spirit." Robinson thought Bird's "shortsighted policy" would diminish company receipts below what they had been when the Portsmouth road was still operating. Progress of the Danville-Richmond road and talk of revival of the Portsmouth Railroad, Robinson figured, endangered Petersburg's situation. The possibility that Bird might join with Wilmington's railroad in a huge through ticket from Charleston to Baltimore did not alarm Robinson for he considered Bird too foolish to take advantage of such a scheme and because he thought his own railway relied more on local traffic. He did fear "a design in Petersburg . . . to throw the line [the Richmond and Petersburg] into confusion." The leader of the "upper route" had to be on his toes to keep the state government at least neutral in the fight and there was undoubtedly either pressure or money applied in the right places to prevent the state from interceding. Both sides aired their views in the legislative halls as part of an investigation of the Port Walthall association at the request of Robert Mayo, the operator of the James River steamboat line allied with Bird's railroad.

While the controversy between Bird and Robinson raged, Petersburgers sought to add another arrow to their quiver. Syme, aware that a loose alliance between Richmond and Lynchburg was coming apart, called for the construction of a new railroad joining the latter town with Petersburg. Lynchburg had benefitted to some extent from its location on the James River, but its citizens realized that the far western trade offered a bright future. In the fall of 1847 the town's residents backed the idea of a road called the "Richmond and Ohio," which would meet the James River at Lynchburg. Delegates from Lynchburg and several western counties meeting at Wytheville also urged a branch road through southwestern Virginia

26 Letter, Moncure Robinson to Edwin Robinson, July 1, 1847, Moncure Robinson Papers, College of William and Mary Library.
27 Letter, Bird to Brown, April 7, 1847, Petersburg Railroad Company, BPW.
28 Letter, M. Robinson to E. Robinson, June 21, 1847, Robinson Papers.
29 Ibid., August 31, 1847.
30 Ibid., February 8, 1848.
31 Ibid., January 9, 1848.
to the Tennessee border. A minority at this convention wanted to extend the Danville Road, but a strong Lynchburg delegation defeated this effort. As Lynchburg argued with both Richmond and Danville, Syme advanced his thought that Petersburg should erect a line to a point 40 miles to the west—there joining two other roads coming from Danville and Lynchburg. The Lynchburg Virginian stated that Syme's proposal "seems to have caused some fluttering in Richmond. It is a subject of some interest to us." This proposal had no direct bearing on the outcome of the dispute between the north-south railroads, but in the next decade Petersburg was able to take advantage of her location for east-west traffic to wrest commerce away from the capital.

In the struggle over the north-south traffic the "Bay Company" proved to be the key to victory. After the failure of the Portsmouth road, the steamboat company turned to the James River boats for travelers. In the spring of 1847 Robinson considered preventing an alliance between the Bay line and the Petersburg Railroad Company one of his major policies. A year later, with the City Point Railroad rebuilt, which greatly strengthened Bird's hand, Robinson feared the Petersburg organization might somehow take prospective "upper route" passengers. In the event this occurred Robinson threatened to put "a line of boats in the Bay in connection with the revised Portsmouth Road." In other words the principal owner of the R. F. & P. was willing to sacrifice his own traffic to destroy Bird's. Actually Bird never did cement an alliance with the Bay line. In the summer of 1846 the board of the Petersburg Company resolved to "permit no agents either of the Bay Company or the Rail Roads north of Petersburg" to have free passes or use any company facilities to sell tickets. Bird argued that the real culprits were the northern Virginia railroads which kept rates high. Lowering rates, he suggested, would eliminate competition from the James River boats. By providing steamboat service down the James River, both companies increased the importance of Chesapeake Bay. In 1847 Bird estimated that over half the passengers took the Bay route.

In addition to posing a threat as part of an alliance, the Bay line also could endanger all Virginia "fall line" railways by working for the revival of the Portsmouth road, their old ally. When a projected Charleston to New York...
steamship line panicked North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania interests into considering through tickets, and Moncure Robinson stubbornly refused to work with the Chesapeake Bay line, Bird pointed out that only the Bay company was interested in the revival of the Portsmouth road. Excluding the Bay people from competing would likely start the Portsmouth Road again.8

Apparently unknown to Bird, forces were already at work to change the thinking of his hated rival. As early as October 1846 Virginia’s Governor William Smith suggested the possibility of a plan to allow the rebuilding of the old Portsmouth Road and at the same time avert the chaos which led to its demise. The governor was interested primarily in preventing a repetition of the stock failure which he figured cost the state $500,000 directly and $1,000,000 indirectly when the original road failed. Smith called for the formation of one company including the old railroad and the Bay boats. The new company was to be heavily funded by the three inland railroads. This, he hoped, would eliminate ruinous competition since the inland roads “would have no motive to control the trade or travel to any particular route.”39 Governor Smith failed to realize that the nature of the rivalry had radically changed since the death of the Portsmouth line. His ideas eventually bore fruit but not in the manner he visualized.

Northern capitalists were the first to take steps to revise the road to Hampton Roads. Their motives are suspect. According to a contemporary newspaper the whole scheme was preposterous, being devised solely for quick resale at a good profit. Actually the “Henschaw” interests who got control did considerable work, but they resold with a substantial number of shares going to a most unusual party—the Chesapeake Bay Line. Meanwhile that company had experienced a major upheaval among its stockholders. Moncure Robinson of the R. F. & P. along with several of his friends and associates had taken over the Steamboat Company apparently to help fight the Petersburg line. The enterprise was too valuable to destroy and its annihilation would only permit someone else to start a similar line. In its first full year of operation with Robinson as a prominent stockholder, the line earned a fourteen percent dividend, which led him to conclude that it needed “no other business than that of Norfolk and Portsmouth to support it.”40 This statement indicates a willingness to withdraw the Bay line

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88 Letter, Bird to Brown, September 23, 1847, Petersburg Railroad Company, BPW.
89 Letter, William Smith to John Cocke, October 30, 1846, Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad Company, BPW.
40 Letter, M. Robinson to E. Robinson, March 24, 1849, Robinson Papers.
as an instrument in the fight against Petersburg. In the years following, however, Robinson bought into the Seaboard and Roanoke Road. In time he came to see the real value of coastal shipping and reduced his connection with the Richmond railroads. For a few years he sat on the fence. In response to a request that he stop the creation of a through ticket between Petersburg, Norfolk and Baltimore he refused but pointed out that myself and my friends in the Bay line are pecuniarily more interested in proportion in the Bay line than in the upper route... but whilst pecuniarily more interested in travel going by the Bay line than the upper route, our feelings (from having first gone into the Upper route and that we have other friends exclusively there) are more interested in the success of the upper route than the Seaboard and Roanoke railroad and Bay line.41

In 1860 Robinson gave further evidence of his switch when he placed one of his sons in the Seaboard office in Portsmouth thus indicating a preference for the coastal project.

By the early 1850s Richmond had temporarily outwitted her rivals. Petersburg was forced to send most of her goods and passengers on to Richmond while Norfolk's steamboat and railroad interests were under the control of Richmond railroad men. But both Petersburg and Norfolk had options left. They could aid each other in the fight against Richmond.

The long standing feud between Norfolk and Richmond started well before the introduction of the railroads which sparked ill feeling between Norfolk and Petersburg. Early conflicts between the capital and the coast centered on the banking question. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the state government authorized the establishment of a branch banking system with a parent bank in Richmond and branches located in other Virginia towns. Many years later when Norfolk requested a bank of its own, the local editor pointed out that when Norfolk first applied for its own independent bank charter in 1803, Richmond "perhaps a little jealous of the prosperity of her neighbor" acquired control of the bank.42 In 1812 Norfolk's citizens tried once more only to be blocked again. In the mid-1830s Norfolk pressed her claims for an independent institution. Finally in 1837 as part of a general banking reform Norfolk obtained the parent bank of a new system with branches in Richmond and Petersburg. The people of Norfolk, said the editor, owed "a debt of gratitude to the Legislature of 1836-37 which has broken the chain which for more than fifty years has held her

41 Letter (copy), November 15, 1858, Robinson Papers.
42 Herald, April 14, 1837.
[Norfolk] in commercial bondage and paralyzed her energies." Broughton, noting that Petersburg still did not possess a parent bank said the inland town need not worry for Norfolk would not "abuse her trust toward Petersburg as Richmond did to Norfolk."43

Richmond's failure to support federal allocation to the Dismal Swamp Canal Company in the mid 1820s gave Norfolkians reason to criticize the capital. Actually the state legislature, which happened to meet there, and Thomas Ritchie, editor of the Richmond Enquirer, who spoke for much of rural central Virginia, were the culprits. These forces along with part of the congressional delegation were on record opposing internal improvements at federal expense, which also meant voting against federal funds for Hampton Roads.

The coming of the railroad greatly intensified ill will between Norfolk and Richmond. Residents of Norfolk tended to blame Richmond more than Petersburg for what happened to the Portsmouth Railroad. When the legislature refused to change the usual procedure in purchasing stock in internal improvement companies, the Norfolk newspaper understood Petersburg's opposition, but Richmond's position, it said, "could be stimulated by nothing but a deep-rooted jealousy of and hostility to the rise of Norfolk since the new railroad could not possibly harm Richmond but might help Norfolk."44

The Elizabeth River communities, however, were guilty of the same kind of opposition. Richmond was vitally interested in the construction of the James River Canal which was supposed to tap the far western trade for Virginia. While coastal inhabitants did not oppose a charter or state aid for the project, they objected to any special considerations. Ritchie tried to convince seaborders that the James River project would help develop Norfolk as a seaport since all goods flowed through Hampton Roads. He urged Norfolk and Portsmouth not to worry about the "comparatively insignificant Roanoke scheme."45 Perhaps because Richmond often exported more to foreign ports in the 1830s than any other community in the state, very few flatlanders took Ritchie's suggestion seriously.

Richmond, of course, participated only indirectly in the wreck of the Portsmouth Road but coastal residents tended to blame the state government located in Richmond for what happened. There seemed to be a sinister "metropolitan influence" at work to block the rise of the port of Norfolk. Trivial incidents led to inflammatory statements. On one occasion when a

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43 Herald, April 14, 1837.
44 Ibid., March 1, 1833.
45 Quoted in Herald, May 19, 1831.
seaboard newspaper editor felt his community had been neglected in a house committee report, he urged outright secession from Virginia because the “only alternative seemed to be revolution.” Another editor over a similarly unimportant matter stated that “there is a point beyond which patience ceases to be a virtue.” If conditions failed to improve, the paper hoped that our representatives in that body [the General Assembly] will return home, and our people take prompt and decided steps to release themselves from bondage by annexing the city, come what may, to North Carolina—who would at least treat us with decent and common justice.

But in addition to its doubtful legality, secession could not improve Norfolk’s situation and the move to withdraw from Virginia failed to carry.

One of the real problems causing dissension in eastern Virginia was the attitude in the capital. Richmond newspapers rarely mentioned the rebellious views in Hampton Roads. According to this view local rivalry should be snuffed out for the welfare of the entire state in the face of Northern threats. The real problem was that most Richmonders somehow assumed that their city should be the economic hub of the state. It was perfectly natural, somehow, that Virginia’s biggest port was well over one hundred miles inland. They could not understand why Petersburg and Norfolk failed to join them in building up the capital’s commerce to help defend Virginia against the enroachments of Baltimore and New York. As the sectional conflict grew Richmond came to see itself as the state’s first line of defense.

Virginia should have and might have a centre of intellect at her University, a centre of Fashion at her mineral springs, and a centre of capital, trade, and manufactures at Richmond. . . . It is now a well established theory in political economy that the centre of trade robs the extremities, to enrich the country round them. They rob those extremities of their labor, their skill, their thoughts, their intellect, their fashions, their language, their customs, their national identity and independence as well as of their wealth.

In making such comments the Richmond editor obviously had Northern cities in mind, but he failed to realize that in Virginia, Petersburg and Norfolk would be considered “extremities” if Richmond remained the hub. It would have been impossible, however, for such a writer to have been totally unaware of the existence of urban jealousies, for just a short time before he

46 Weekly Southern Argus, February 11, 1851.
47 Herald, February 3, 1852.
48 Richmond Enquirer, (semi-weekly) March 7, 1856.
published the above statement, Richmond suffered its first major defeat at the hands of its two primary antagonists—Norfolk and Petersburg.

In the decade before the Civil War, Virginia poured millions of dollars into an attempt to build up her economic resources. Not only did the James River Canal project continue to receive financial support, but the state began to purchase as much as sixty percent of the stock in a number of railroads, despite the fact that these companies competed with each other and with the canal. The Richmond-oriented Virginia Central Railroad with its western terminal beyond the Blue Ridge mountains opened not only the Valley of Virginia, but potentially via the Covington Railroad, the Ohio Valley as well. In the same period the state chartered three railroads which together would cross southern Virginia reaching Tennessee's railroads to give Petersburg and Norfolk rail connection with the Mississippi River. Norfolk was particularly interested in a railroad to Petersburg, but the whole project also depended on the successful construction of the Southside Road from Petersburg to Lynchburg and the completion of the Virginia and Tennessee which covered the remaining distance to the state border.

An internal improvements convention held in Norfolk in 1854 demonstrates how Richmond's position had deteriorated. The lone Richmond delegate James Lyons "defended Richmond from the charge of inhospitality and want of liberality." He "appealed to the citizens of Norfolk not to take part against the north side." He agreed that the southern roads should be built, but objected to the unusual gauges used. The Richmond road used the standard 4 feet 8½ inch gauge, but the southern roads were all wide gauge, which exceeded 5 feet. Obviously the difference in gauge hindered any effort by Richmond to draw traffic off the southwestern roads. At the same time the southern contingent at the convention called for the wide gauge for the new Covington Road so that its freight could not be carried off to Baltimore. The southern delegation refused to budge except to say that the state should aid railroads both north and south of the James equally and that the state should broaden the gauge of the Central Railroad to conform to those south of the James. Failing to prevent passage of anti-Richmond resolutions, two representatives from the capital asked not to be "considered . . . in the deliberations of the convention." Lyons, who stayed despite the resolves, was undoubtedly distressed at the outcome.

Earlier in the year a Richmond dominated internal improvements conven-

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49 Richmond Enquirer, November 14, 1854.
50 Ibid.
tion had been held at White Sulphur Springs. Although some Tidewater representatives attended the meeting, no Norfolk delegate appeared. The gathering listened to Richard Morris, a Richmonder, complain about the attempt to build up Norfolk. "To do this," he said, "other cities of equal claims are to be set aside—the interests of other sections of the State disregarded." Seeking to calm troubled waters, Joseph Segar, a coastal delegate, stressed the value of the Covington route. To disturbed Richmond businessmen, he pointed out that certain branch roads which might enable Norfolk to share in the trans-mountain commerce, would not really hurt the capital. Segar also presented himself as a friend of Norfolk. The southside railroads even with branch lines, he predicted would fail to bring ample shipments. Heavy freight charges would keep the James River Canal at a premium. In addition Petersburg planned to draw the western trade to City Point, thus forcing it down the James River anyway. Since Norfolk had far superior harbor facilities, she was bound eventually to control a large portion of the western freight.

The capital, though, was not completely cut off from commerce. The Virginia Central continued to carry goods produced in the Valley and one day in the not too distant future the far greater resources of the Ohio Valley might come to the James. Since their own river lacked depth, Richmond began to build a railway to Eltham (West Point) to reach deep water on the York River. Norfolk tried to check Richmond's advantage in the valley by diverting the traffic of the Virginia Central to Petersburg, but little could be done about the York River port except to complain and be comforted by the knowledge that Eltham was not Richmond.

The attempt to keep future traffic from Richmond created a considerable stir, for Richmonders deeply resented the plan which would have diverted an already existing traffic. A Norfolk editor dreamed up an idea of building a railroad from Charlottesville to Petersburg thus permitting central Virginia produce to come to Norfolk once the Norfolk-Petersburg Railroad was completed. A contributor to the Weekly Southern Argus applauded the editor saying, "If ever the Covington is built, Norfolk through this line (Petersburg and Charlottesville), will be its eastern terminal." Those proposing such a road did not ask for state aid because such a request might endanger

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51 Proceedings of the Internal Improvements Convention Held at White Sulphur Springs, on the 24, 25 and 26 August, 1854... (Richmond, 1855), p. 3.
52 Speech of Joseph Segar Esq. of Elizabeth City County on the Covington and Ohio Railroad Delivered Before the White Sulphur Springs Convention August 25, 1854, pp. 3-30.
53 Weekly Southern Argus, January 17, 1856.
the possibility of obtaining a charter. The optimistic correspondent to the 
paper believed that enough capital would be available once the Covington 
Road had been built.

Be of good cheer men of Norfolk! The hope so long deferred you will yet realize. The 
West is with us. Western members say, "Well, if we ever expect to have a seaport 
Norfolk is the spot. We must concentrate on Norfolk, Richmond won't do."

The proverbial monkey wrench appeared, however, when the state legis-
lature refused even to charter the Petersburg and Charlottesville line. The 
editor of the Argus was furious.

Are Senators insane? Have they determined that (as it were) a Mason and Dixon 
line shall be drawn through the State of Virginia, South of Richmond and North of 
Norfolk?—that Norfolk should be kept in perpetual bondage below this line, while 
the privileges of crossing it and tapping the improvements south of it shall be extended 
to Richmond, Alexandria and all places north of it?55

He strongly suggested that Norfolk and other southern delegates refuse to 
aid any other state projects as long as the "only seaport of Virginia is to be 
plundered by taxation without participation!"56 Once again Norfolk's resi-
dents considered the prospects of seceding from Virginia and joining North 
Carolina. But by this time another kind of secession was rapidly becoming 
the central question of the age and sectional differences crowded local and 
state issues off the stage.

There can be little doubt that urban rivalry was an important ingredient 
in the history of Virginia's railroads, but it is quite difficult to isolate such 
controversies from other factors. For example, whenever Petersburg and 
Norfolk banded together the railroad fights took on a sectional hue with the 
James River acting as a dividing line. Also, it is virtually impossible to deter-
mine where pecuniary motives stop and community pride begins. Thirst 
for profit undoubtedly prompted investments in many cases. But immedi-
ate financial reward was not expected from stock in Virginia's roads. News-
papers stressed stock purchases as a patriotic act. All classes were urged to 
participate. There is much evidence to indicate that community came be-
fore individual gain. The subscriber lists for the Portsmouth and Roanoke 
Railroad show ownership widely dispersed. In 1842 about eighty percent 
of the private stockholders owned ten shares or less, and of the 270 share-
holders only 26 owned more than 20 shares. The biggest stock purchasers

54 Weekly Southern Argus, January 17, 1856.
55 Ibid., March 10, 1856.
56 Ibid.

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were the state and local governments with the state's share running forty percent of the total while the Borough of Norfolk and the Town of Portsmouth as a result of public meetings held 2,000 and 2,500 shares respectively. The situation was much the same in Petersburg's case. In 1832 with 228 private holders, 39 owned but one share and only a small number controlled more than ten. The state held its usual percentage and the Corporation of Petersburg owned nearly twelve percent. A few years later some Philadelphians bought into the company, but they retained only a small portion of the total number of shares in private hands. Stock lists of the R. F. & P. reveal a similar pattern.57

Merchants and other businessmen probably used an urban rivalry smoke screen to enlarge their operations. Railroad managers especially were known to employ such tactics. Robinson knew the value of community pride. In a fight to retain a favorable mail contract with the federal government against Petersburg's attempt to take it away, the leader of the "upper route" called on his brother "to keep the press and people of Richmond as united as possible in our behalf."58 As trained engineers these men moved around a good deal. Walter Gwynn, onetime president of the Portsmouth line, later served in a similar capacity with the James River and Kanawha Canal Company. Moncure Robinson started as a civil engineer with the Petersburg Company and had investments in many important railroads in the state. He lived in Philadelphia when urban rivalry reached a peak. As has been pointed out, Robinson switched allegiances just before the Civil War, but this move did not change his basic technique for one finds him in 1860 cautioning his son to do nothing to irritate the citizens of Portsmouth who were doubtlessly a little miffed because their railroad was in the hands of their former enemies.59

What influence did local rivalry have on the economic development of the communities concerned? If population growth is the principal barometer, Richmond won for by 1860 her population excluding her suburbs exceeded 37,000 while Petersburg and Norfolk had failed to develop as rapidly. The capital more than doubled Norfolk's rate of growth in the thirty years after the advent of the railroad. Hampton Roads was saved from stagnation largely because of the growth of the federally owned Gosport Shipyard whose expansion allowed Portsmouth to develop rapidly.

57 Stockholder Reports of the various companies may be found interspersed through each company's Board of Public Works MSS.
58 Letter, M. Robinson to E. Robinson, December 30, 1847, Robinson Papers.
59 Letter, M. Robinson to John Robinson, February 3, 1860 Robinson Papers.
Petersburg fared a little better than Norfolk, but had been unable to keep pace with the James River city. Since Richmond was already moving forward before the coming of the railroads, it may be concluded that the presence of these facilities merely accentuated a trend already underway. In this period, however, railroads played generally a defensive role. Had Richmond, for instance, not built her roads she would have suffered. And if Petersburg had failed to make rail connections to the Roanoke, she would probably have ceased to exist as a major economic center.

After the Civil War Norfolk's connection with rail lines west and south gave her dominion over a large portion of the nation's cotton commerce. The larger ships of the postwar era rarely ascended the James to Richmond or even the York to West Point. Richmond, like Petersburg, had to place more emphasis on industrial development to maintain her population. But long after the war, these urban quarrels, though marked with less bitterness, occasionally reappeared. The antebellum rivalries left an enduring legacy.

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